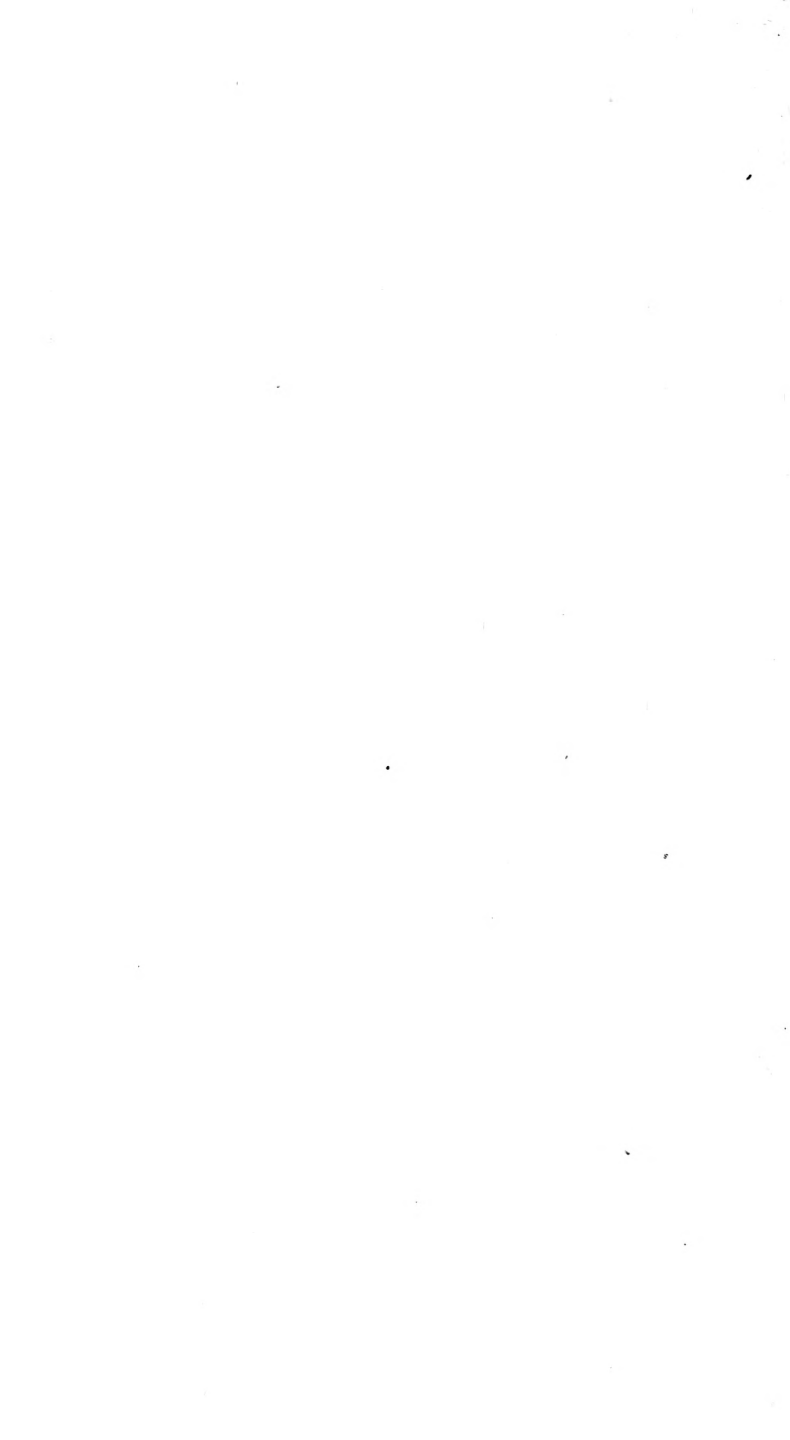




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THE

SCRIPTURE READER'S GUIDE

TO THE

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DEVOTIONAL USE

OF

THE HOLY SCRIPTURES.

BY CAROLINE FRY. *Wilson.*

Author of "Christ our Law," "Sabbath Musings," "The Listener,"
"Christ our Example," &c.

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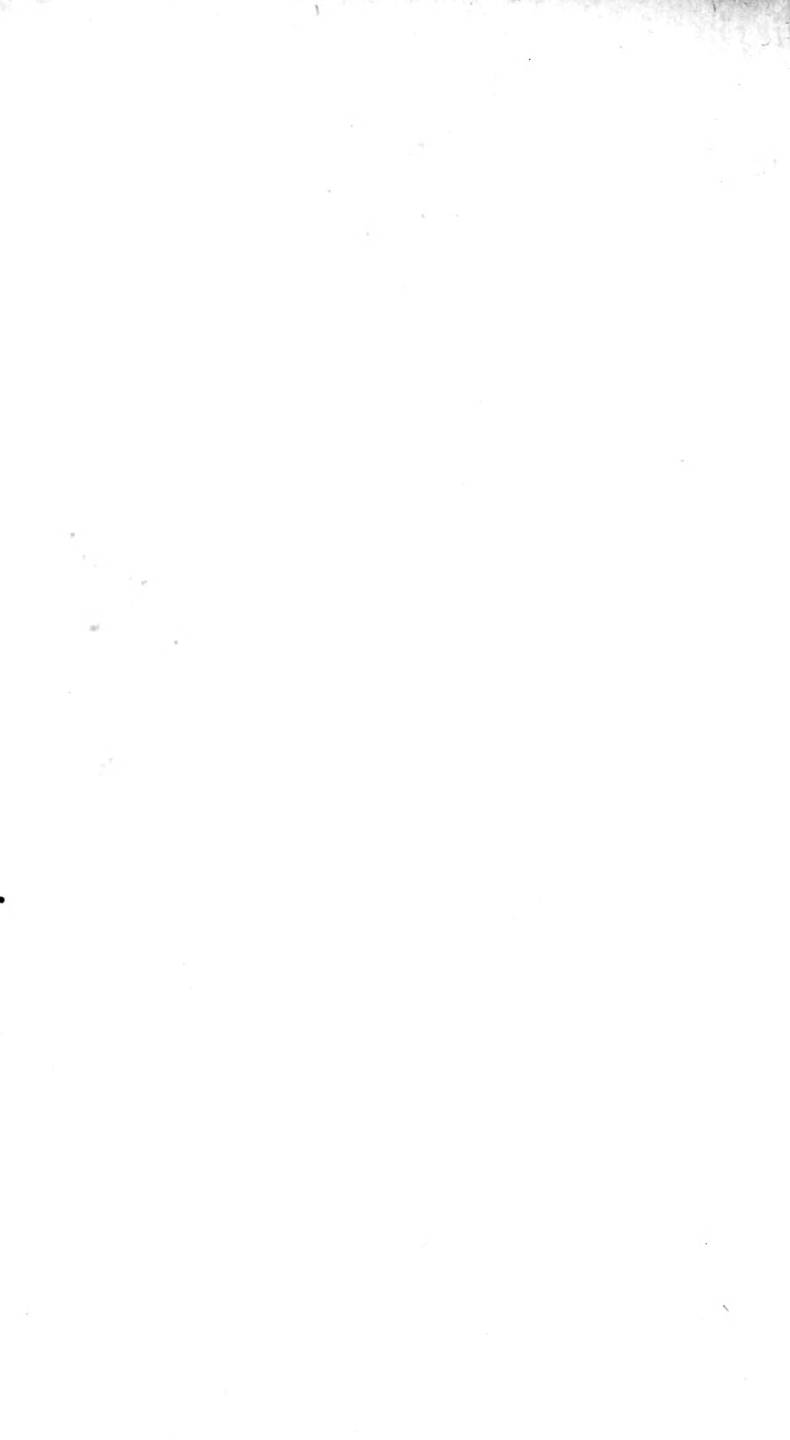
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P R E F A C E .

THE writing of the following remarks was first suggested by questions, repeatedly addressed to me by the less experienced in religion, as to the most profitable manner of perusing the Holy Scriptures. In preparing them for publication I did not forget that the subject has been often and fully treated by abler hands ; neither did I undertake it with an intention to condemn or supersede anything that has been written. My intention was only to offer a few hints, the result of experience, for which I desire not the praise of originality, nor any praise but that of employing my time and talents to the purpose for which they were entrusted to me. It is a long time since I read any of the books in circulation upon the subject of Scripture Reading. If I have unconsciously collected and reproduced the opinions of others, let them be re-

ceived as such ; if they are useful, my end is fully answered. The testimonies which, after the publication of the first section in a periodical work, I received of the benefit that had been derived from my remarks and many solicitations made to me since, has determined me to republish them in the present form. I feel that I have treated an inexhaustible subject but very slightly. If, however, to any individual mind the value of the Scriptures has been enhanced, if a single person has been enabled to read with more profit to themselves and more gratitude to God, by the remarks I have made, the work has been already blessed beyond its merits.

ON THE
DEVOTIONAL READING
OF THE
Holy Scriptures.

SECTION FIRST.

THE IMPORTANCE OF READING THE SCRIPTURES.

THE importance of reading the Holy Scriptures—Does anybody doubt it? I believe they do, even of those who practise it. For to acknowledge the duty of an act, is not necessarily to feel its importance. If a master I am hired to serve, or a patron I have an interest in obliging, should bid me walk to the extremity of London to inquire what o'clock it is, I might judge it of importance to myself to obey the command; lest I should lose favour of more value than the pains. But I should think little of the im-

portance of the errand: I should be very little curious to know what o'clock it might be when I arrived: nor feel much the wiser when I returned. 'This, I fear, is about the measure of importance a large number of Scripture readers attach to the performance of their task. It is a duty. It may not be an irksome one, nor do they, perhaps, feel any desire to be released from it. The measure of performance is entirely in their own judgment; but whether they think they ought to read it every day, or twice a day, or only one day in seven, there is a sense of wrong and danger attached to the omission of the practice, which they are very unwilling to incur. Conscientiously, therefore, at these stated periods, be they frequent or be they few, they return to the perusal of the Holy Book. I would not discourage even such reading as this; heartless and inefficient as it is, it is better than nothing. But it is heartless and it is inefficient; and beyond the propriety of doing a supposed duty, no importance whatever is attached to it. It is the letter of a printed book they feel it necessary to read—but what the purport of that book may be, is of no importance to the interests of the reader. They have no percep-

tion of being wiser, or better, or happier, when they lay it down—nay, they had not the least expectation of being so when they took it up. Unless, indeed, it be a sort of charm, which I truly believe some unreflecting persons think the Bible has on them, that, without the least attention to its meaning, will make them very good, and transport them into heaven.

Our observations on the manner of studying the Scriptures are not chiefly intended for readers of this character: but rather for those, who, with an honest and devoted heart, inexperienced and desirous of advice, go to them as the most important of all human studies. But these will excuse us, if, in this introductory chapter, we dwell on a point to them unnecessary, in the hope of awakening others to some interest in what may follow, and convincing them that of the very practice they so assiduously adhere to, they are as yet unconscious of the vital importance.

The sense of duty apart—that sort of traditionary or hereditary sense of duty which they have received from their parents—the importance attached to the reading of the Scriptures by the unawakened heart, is very little more than to the perusal of other books. Some curiosity respecting the historic relations—some

enjoyment of the poetic beauties—perhaps, though I believe not often, some desire of gaining from it a rule of moral conduct. I say not often, because if an inquirer desires information, he will abide by the answer he receives—therefore, if I see any one peruse a chapter that prescribes one line of conduct, and, on the closing of the book, deliberately pursue the opposite, I cannot understand that a rule of conduct was the object of the reading. So little is their real idea of the importance of the study, they would scarcely conceal surprise, perhaps betray disgust, were it proposed to them to read the Bible out of the canonical hours they have prescribed to themselves.

The harassed victim of acute disease, if he hears of some treatise on his disorder, sends for it to his bed, reads it intently, considers the statement, and the probability of finding relief in the regimen it proposes, because to him it is a subject of importance. The healthful puts it aside again—it is nothing to him. The judge who has to form his judgments, and to guide his decisions by the different constructions and applications of the law, searches the statute book, and refers to the reports with the deepest attention, because he needs the information they contain. Any other person

will consider them useless reading, or look at them from curiosity and amusement only. So also the prince, whose life and lands depend on the issue of a campaign, will read the report of a battle with far different feelings than the individual who hears of it at a distance as news of the day. This is exactly the difference between the interested and the uninterested, the enlightened and unenlightened reader of the Scriptures. One goes to it because he is told it is the word of God, though whether it be so or not, he has not inquired—and therefore he ought to read, though of any good it does him he is not conscious: the other, because he cannot do without it—it is the chief object of his pursuit, and the deepest interest of his bosom.

I think between these I have observed a middle class. They do believe the importance of the Scriptures to themselves individually; they think they ought to enjoy the reading of them, and be influenced and benefited by it. They take it again and again with that determination; but they do not succeed. Conscious of the failure, they are uneasy—they have recourse to commentaries, in the hope that the comment will excite more interest than the text—they apply to rules for reading, and honestly adopt any scheme that any adviser may-

suggest for the more efficient perusal of God's word. But still it is a cold mechanical process—they go to it without pleasure, and return from it without gain—they hear that others find it not thus, and their spirits are disquieted within them, by reason of the indifference they feel. To such we would greatly desire to be useful in the little we may be enabled to impart. The evil is very deep—it can be reached by no regimen of man's prescribing—it lies at the heart's core, too hard as yet to feel what the judgment assents to, believing to be valuable what yet it does not value. The first thing to be done is to ask of Heaven to unclothe the sealed book, to give the willing heart, and the understanding mind. The next thing is to persevere, steadily and anxiously persevere against all unwillingness and discouragement, in searching the yet lifeless and inefficient word. For by it, oftener than by any other means, has its own treasure been unlocked, and the Spirit of light and truth been conveyed into the bosom. If to such an one I could convey but temporary and intermediate assistance, amply indeed would my labour be repaid.

There cannot be a stronger proof, and there should scarcely seem to need any other, of the total corruption of the heart of man, than this

absence of all emotion in reading or hearing read the word of God. The source whence it comes—the character perfectly singular of its contents—the immense importance of the things it treats of—the destiny, not of single nations, but of the universe; not of the universe in an aggregate, undistinguished mass, but of the individual, forlorn, forgotten, and despised, whoever he may be, that chances to lay hand upon its hallowed pages—the exquisite delights that it proposes—the tremendous picture of misery it draws—the amazing revelation that it makes of things unseen, of the buried past, and the impervious future—the enormous stake that depends on its being true or not true, rejected or received—Can anything but the stupified, besotted state to which sin is said to have reduced the heart of man, account for his perusal of this book from day to day, without so much interest or emotion as he feels at the relation of the commonest incidents of domestic life, or the fictitious adventures of some unknown journalist.

The effect of this depravity is rendered yet more apparent by the change that takes place, when the mind is awakened from its death-like torpor by the spirit of truth and holiness. Many have experienced—will those who have not,

not believe their testimony?—a change so immediate and so strange in their feeling towards this book, that but for the explanation of the change given in the book itself, they would be almost bewildered by the strangeness of their love for it. When the dusty occupant of the upper shelf, reserved for Sunday reading, comes down to be their bosom's treasure, the companion of their walks, their morning refreshment and their evening comfort, more needful to them than their daily bread, and more precious than rubies in their sight, it is the contents of the book, and not the duty of reading it, that becomes important. As the exiled child of a parent he adores, does not open his letters because he is told his father wrote them, and he ought to read; and as the needy petitioner to his prince does not ask if he is required to peruse the answer to his petition; so the really awakened spirit cannot need to ask how much or how often he ought to read the word of God. Every syllable it contains is of the deepest importance to him; and it contains so much that he never can exhaust it by repetition. And even if he could acquire all the information it contains, he could not the more desist from reading—for beside instruction, its words are the medicine of his sickness, the comfort of his

sadness, the music of his joy, the very aliment that sustains him in an ungenial world. Judge if it be of importance to him. And let those who know nothing of all this, in their cold-hearted, ceremonial readings, judge whether something in themselves must not be the cause of so great a difference of feeling, towards that which concerns us equally.

I know that it is not necessary to persuade the pious spirit of the importance of reading the word of God. Yet even to these, in the first fervour of religious feeling, I would suggest it earnestly to make the Scripture their study, in preference to every other religious book ; and particularly while their minds are agitated and their opinions unsettled. It is at these times we are most disposed to leave it, and seek advice elsewhere. We fancy we cannot understand the word of God ; we ask anybody and everybody what they think about the points that agitate us. We read volume after volume, and argument upon argument ; and should really, I believe, if the feeling were analyzed, rather consent that the Bible be taken from us, than that we be deprived of the preacher who expounds it. Certainly the spiritual help we can afford each other, and especially the ministry established by God himself for our assist-

ance, are advantages he never meant we should dispense with; he knew us too weak to do without them; and to despise these aids would be to set at naught his wisdom and goodness. Still I do not hesitate to say, that we should much sooner come at a right knowledge of the truth, and acquire steadiness in religion, both of principles and conduct, if we listened more to God and less to man—if we took our doubts, and our fears, and our speculations as they arise, to the Holy Scripture for solution, accompanied with instant prayer for the Spirit's help; instead of flying to the first book, and to every book that has been written on the subject; till that which in the words of inspiration is simple, plain, and pure as the sun-beams of heaven, becomes confused, mystified, and entangled by conflicting arguments and embellishments of man's devising, beyond the power of an inexperienced mind to unravel. The essential truths of the Gospel are not difficult to understand, and the path of right conduct is not difficult to find. It is impossible they should be; because the persons by whom it is declared they will be best received and understood, are the poor, the unlearned, and the simple. God could not act so much in opposition to his own designs, as to make his message incom-

prehensible to those by whom it would be welcomed, till they could find an interpreter among the wise and learned, by whom he expressly says, it would be ill received. And the fact confirms the probability. Nowhere are the Scriptures so well understood, and believed, and obeyed with so much honest simplicity of heart, as by the unlettered peasant, who learns all his religion from the Bible, takes the words on their plain meanings, and believes and obeys them, because he knows they are the words of God. Or by those who, after years of perturbed inquiry—after measuring every doctrine by their own reason, and weighing every precept by their own wisdom, trying if the text may not say everything but what it does say, and perceiving everything in it but its obvious sense, baffled and ashamed, have ended where the peasant begins; and putting to silence the intellect that has but encumbered them, receive as little children the simple word of God, believe it without question, and obey it without reserve.

If this is the state of mind in which the Bible is by divine appointment to be studied, it must be that to which its language is adapted. When therefore we find it hard to understand, it is because our intellects are blinded and our

spirits darkened by corrupt desires and perverted habits of mind. The language of truth is too strange to us to be understood—forgotten, as our mother tongue might be, in long banishment from home. We must go to our Father to teach it us again—we must study it anew from his own lips—we shall find it purest and sweetest thence. Instead of putting the Scriptures aside till we have acquired more wisdom and knowledge to peruse them with, we must unclothe ourselves of that we think we have, and earnestly apply ourselves to the study.

SECTION SECOND.

THE OBJECT OF READING THE HOLY SCRIPTURES.

BEFORE anything can be done well, it is necessary to know our object in undertaking it; without this it is the work of idleness. I have said that to perform a mere duty is not the purpose with which the Scriptures should be read. Let us consider then the purposes to be answered, and the objects we ought to have in view. These purposes are many—as many as our deficiencies, our necessities, our desires. The whole may be comprised in three things—Knowledge, Holiness, and Happiness. These, successively or together, should be the object of our reading; the method that will subserve either of these ends will be good; that will be best which shall promote them all.

Without the Holy Scriptures man has no knowledge, absolutely none. He never could have had any, of God or himself, or of his destiny. It was tried for thousands of years where the Scriptures were not, by savage simplicity and intellectual wisdom; and the one

gained as much, as little as the other. A vague idea of deity and immortality, with some few scattered lights beside, inherited by tradition from their fathers, served to disturb men in their darkness, but never to enlighten them. It is tried now by thousands where the Scriptures are. With the book in their hands, men continue to form their opinions upon anything or everything but what that book contains—upon prejudice, upon human reason, upon unexamined authorities—oftenest of all upon their own base wishes and desires. And what do they know? Absolutely nothing. Of God—I speak to one of God, who has not his knowledge of him from the Bible, though professing to believe it. He does not turn to the bright orb of day and tell me that is God: he does not point me to some misformed image on his chimney, and tell me that is God: but he does little better. His conception is of a God all goodness, who has created a world all evil, and left it to what chances may betide. A God who has made laws, but does not expect they should be kept, neither intends to exact the penalties he has attached to them. A God, one, perfect, immutable, about whom everybody may think what they please, give him what service they please, or, if they please, not any

service at all. A God, in short, Creator, Judge, Disposer, Lord of all things, the last to be thought of, the last to be cared for, the last to be trusted, and the last obeyed, after the interests of life, the claims of society, and the gratifications of self have no further demand on us. The idea of deity will vary a little more or a little less from this, according as the knowledge of him has been partially borrowed from the Scriptures, without being taken from it as a whole; but these adjuncts of truth to falsehood produce but the greater inconsistency; and we hear of a God of truth, who will keep his word in nothing—a God of holiness, who will take corruption to his bosom—a God of mercy, who has denounced eternal misery that none deserve—a God of wisdom, who has devised a plan of salvation everybody can do without, and sent messengers from heaven to teach, what men may do as they like, whether they will believe or not. This is the knowledge thousands have of God, who read the Bible, but do not form their opinions from it.

That man should live in ignorance of himself, an object so near, so intimate, seems even more surprising. Yet it is so obvious, it passes for proverbial truth. "Nobody knows himself," is a current phrase in the world, where nothing

like spiritual knowledge is meant. Deceived in his motives, deceived in his desires, deceived in the bearing and colourings of his character, he thinks he has fulfilled a law of which he never knew the import, and earned reward where punishment awaits him. He thinks he is rich and increased in goods, and has need of nothing, while his incensed creditor is at the door, waiting his coming out to seize and sell him to perdition for his dues unpaid. He thinks he is upright, and strong, and free; while he has not a single power of mind or body that is not enslaved, enfeebled, and corrupted. He thinks he serves the one and only God, while he carries in his bosom a thousand idols, whom he loves and serves, by turns, leaving that one and only God unworshipped. He thinks he is fulfilling the purposes of his creation in life, and going to heaven when he dies, while he has not so much as inquired of God's purposes, or cared to fulfil them; but having perverted himself and all within his reach, is in a condition that would make heaven a place of wretchedness to him, might he come there.

Of his destiny—the traveller knows the way he sets out for—the very brute knows the goal he runs for—but ask man of his eternal destiny, he tells you he does not know; if he spoke

truth, he would say he does not care ; everything in his conduct proves he does not. Or if he has borrowed from Scripture a half-received, half-credited report of what will be hereafter, and has gotten into his mind a heaven of reward for obedience he has not attempted, and a hell of punishment for evil he does not believe he has committed, examine his conception of them—the former is something to which he means to resign himself when he cannot help it, desirable only as the alternative of the latter. What either means he does not affect to know. And even this knowledge, little as it is, is derived from revelation. We cannot prove it, because all men having descended from one who had a revelation, no such isolated being is to be found ; but it is likely man would never of himself have discovered his immortality at all ; and if he had, we know from the wild belief of different savage nations, it would be made up of the things that happen to surround and interest his mortality. In some sense, savages prove themselves wiser than nominal Christians. They having no light from revelation, have made an eternity that at least will suit them ; we, while unregenerate and unsanctified, unable to rid ourselves altogether of the light, have a heaven in anticipation for which we are totally

unfit. If thus I have correctly measured the sum of human knowledge with regard to eternal things, before the Bible is really and effectually studied, it is evident that one great object of pursuit in reading it, should be knowledge.

But, important as it is, to know is neither to be nor to do. There are those who have a thorough knowledge of Scripture, a deep and critical knowledge of it—who have perused the text till every expression is familiar to their lips—have compared, examined, and digested it—read comments, and controversies, and criticisms, till their understanding is thoroughly enlightened on every subject it proposes—and still their hearts remain unchanged, unsanctified, unhallowed by its influence. Either as a whole they do not really believe it, though they say they do, or by reason of their attachment to other things, they will take all risks rather than comply with its demands. But without recurring to these extreme cases, the most advanced saint has as much need to seek holiness in the perusal of the Scriptures, as the unawakened sinner; and the more he is a saint, the more he feels this need. When we have been taught of God to know Him, to know ourselves, our eternal destiny, and that Divine Being through whom we are to reach it, with all the secrets

of love, and mercy, and eternal bliss his word unfolds—and when we have believed, adored, and determined to obey—when we seek heaven as our home, and feel as sure of it as the plighted word of Him we trust can make us; strange as it seems, we may be yet not ready for it. Imagine the heir of nobility lost in infancy, and brought up in poverty and vice. Let him be found again on his approach to man, and recognized, and taken home, the acknowledged heir of his father's house and name. What would he be? He would bring with him the habits, tastes, and feelings of his degradation: at times, the restraint on them would be so irksome, he would incline to unlord himself again, and return to his companions in the cellar: and when best disposed, and most anxious to become his station, in spite of himself, he would find his coarse habits, his low propensities, his sordid appetites return upon him, betraying his education, and putting him to shame before the polished members of his family. There is no exaggeration in the comparison. This is the condition of every sinner redeemed by Divine mercy, and received into the family of God. However sure his title, and however secure his inheritance, he is still a sinner, and will continue so to the hour of his death. But not

contentedly. He is now miserable and ashamed, for habits that once were natural to him; and if they should follow him to heaven, he would be miserable there. It is not enough to him to know that eternal glory has been purchased for him, and bestowed without price or merit of his own. The more he sees of this, the more he grows ashamed; the more he feels the contrast between what he is, and what his high estate demands. He tries and tries, but the marks of his degradation still appear. He sees them when others cannot. He sees his Father's watchful eye upon him, angered and grieved by his unseemly bearing, though loving still and patient. O! it is a bitter, bitter struggle! At times he almost wishes to return to ignorance and sin, rather than stand thus exposed, degraded, and ashamed; he would wish it quite, but for the assurance he receives that he will some time be made fit for the station he is placed in and the honours that await him. Holiness becomes thus as indispensable as knowledge—in some stages of our progress, more so—for knowledge sufficient may have been acquired—holiness sufficient never can be, till we are perfected in glory. Now while everything in the ordinary occupations of life has a tendency to unsanctify the heart, and renew

associations we wish to put aside, everything in the Holy Scriptures has a tendency to holiness. They tell us, to the minutest particular, what we ought to be—what we ought to do—the life and customs of our Father's house. They offer motives so irresistible, principles so effectual ; they disclose truths so calculated to soften and subdue the natural resistance of the heart ; they make holiness so lovely and sin so revolting, that though I do not say they are the only means, or can of themselves effect it, the Scriptures are certainly a most powerful instrument in the hand of God to improve the character, and sanctify the heart. Therefore another object in perusing them should be Holiness.

Need we tell man that he wants Happiness ? The former two he may dispute—he thinks he has them or can do without. The third ; I am not sure—I believe he does not always know that he wants that—but there he is quickly undeceived. A few people say that they are happy. It may be so. We are told that the senseless Bedlamite is happy. Some cheeks I have seen, that look as if no tears had stained them ; some eyes, as if no sleepless nights had dimmed them. I have passed by them a few years after, and the cheek was furrowed and

the eye was sunk, but not with age. Sin and misery are pledged to eternal union—whether they may part company for a time, I cannot say—if they do, it is but to join again in more lasting and intimate embrace. Whether man in general wants happiness, let the aspect of society tell—let the crowded hall, let the secret chamber tell. Sick with its own, and sick with others' miseries, let the experienced bosom tell the extent of a demand the world has failed to satisfy.

The want of happiness has driven thousands to their Bible, who never else had gone to it—they have gone thither, because what was nowhere else, they thought might possibly be there. And they have found it there. Not those only whom the world has wronged, rejected, disappointed, and so left miserable—but those also whom it has caressed, enriched, indulged, and still left miserable. Both characters, when they have sought happiness in everything else and failed of it, have sought it and found it in the Bible. We speak of the first great finding, when, awakened by divine grace, the heart is taken from the world and fixed on God. And such happiness is it, when the straitened spirit bursts the bondage of iniquity, and goes free of the chains that wearied it—when the heart

first looks upon Deity as a friend, and heaven as its hope—to see the extent of our misery, and see it escaped—to see the bliss of immortality, and see it secured; to see God, that being so great, so distant, so awful, brought near and manifested in the sweetest lineaments of love in the person of Jesus, the sinner's friend, companion, comforter—O it is such bliss, it might seem impossible, having learned it once and believing it, that man should ever be in want of happiness again.

The enjoyment to be derived from such a prospect as the Scripture opens to us, is so apparent to common sense, and common feeling, that many who do not believe the Gospel, have wondered why those who do, care anything about the intervening trifles of mortality. They have wondered, because they were not aware of the sin and partial unbelief which continues to distract our bosoms: and the believer never ceases to wonder at himself, that he is so ungrateful, so weak, so earthly, as to desire any other happiness. Those, however, who affect to doubt the reality of religion, because that which in its nature should be sufficient for happiness, does not seem to make its professors happy, take a very confined view of the fact. They see religion in the market-place, and in

the hall, where it thrives not best. They see it in its weak though honest votaries, in whose hearts the world and self are yet struggling for the mastery, and at times triumphant over better principles and purer hopes ; and they do not see it where its sufficiency is proved—in hearts that without it would break, and with it are at rest—in loss, in injury, in agony, to which its promises have rendered the sufferer almost insensible—in garrets, where the light of day cannot enter, but the joys of heaven are almost begun—in age, sickness, starvation, death. I have seen religion in all these situations, and heard its votaries confess their happiness. If any disbelieve, let them go and see, they need not seek it far ; the jewels of the Redeemer's crown are hidden treasures, but they are not few.

There is, then, happiness in religion. But religious people are not always happy. As long as sin remains, its companion tarries too ; and takes advantage of every incautious, slumbering moment, to give a parting wound. Nature's desires and infirmities remain ; and the spirit, winged for heaven, the back already turned, the foot already lifted from the earth, is assailed by a thousand arrows from beneath to bring it down again. The flesh is touched, the

wings flutter, the strength fails—down and down again—still soaring, and still struggling upward, but still returning, as some fresh missile reaches it. The believer's happiness is a full cup—but as he drinks it out, he must go to refill it where he had it first. He thirsts, and must go to the spring—he hungers, and must go to be fed—his supply of happiness is not within him. The first great source of comfort is the Redeemer himself, besought in humble, fervent prayer: the Holy Scriptures are its richest stream, and are most eminently suited to impart it. There is no kind, no condition of sorrow, to which they do not address themselves. There is no possible circumstance of misery for which they do not suggest an adequate relief, or of suffering to which they do not administer a medicine. To cheer, to soothe, to strengthen—to shame our impatience, to allay our fears, to encourage our efforts, to unload our bosoms, to make us rejoice in the midst of sorrow, and triumph in the depths of despondency—what gentle remonstrances, what persuasive arguments, what powerful examples, what celestial promises! Very little indeed do they know of the importance of the Holy Scriptures, who do not go to them for happiness.

SECTION THIRD.

THE MANNER OF READING THE HOLY SCRIPTURES.

MANY methods and forms of biblical reading have been suggested and followed: all, perhaps, where the heart is honest, with proportionate success. I should be sorry to seem to impugn any, or be understood to call them useless, if I intimate that they are insufficient. This is not my meaning or intention.

The appointed reading of the Scriptures in our churches, is a greater blessing than our minds, deadened by custom, are at all times aware of. Thousands become in this way familiar with the language of Scripture, who have no desire to be so, and learn the truth before they have a heart to love it. For a time it is a dead letter indeed, and makes no impression—the less, perhaps, for its familiarity—but still the memory registers what the feelings reject. And very often it happens, that in moments of suffering, or danger, or despondency, the slighted word comes back; the neglected truths are retraced; and they come with a force and mean-

ing they never had before. And no sooner does divine grace unclothe the thrice barred heart, than these treasures of memory become more precious than mines of gold. To the poor who cannot read, or who read imperfectly, this familiarity with the language of Scripture has proved invaluable.

I am inclined to think the same with respect to accustoming children to read and learn the Scriptures, while it is yet evident that it is a mere task, performed like every other task imposed on them. Where this is all that can be done, wanting means to impress it on the heart, it seems safer to do it than to neglect it; though a great deal of painful irreverence certainly does attach to this practice in schools of every kind, most painful to the pious heart to witness.

The family reading of the Holy Scriptures bears a character more nearly devotional; and whatever the distracted minds of individuals may mix with it of inattention and empty form, the practice must be good, and is used, I believe, night and morning, in every pious family. The very ceremony of summoning a family together for such a purpose is an external acknowledgment of God, and of the importance the head of the family attaches to his word; and it is a recommendation of the Holy Book

to the private examination of the individual members. I should be sorry to suppose that these appointed readings are considered by any one as dispensing with the necessity of studying it in private: by no means can they answer the same or an equal purpose.

In the private perusal of the Scriptures, we may consider how far it is advantageous to read at appointed hours, and in progressive order. With respect to appointed hours, there is but to weigh the danger of formality—of taking the book because the clock strikes, rather than because we desire it—of reading it till the time is out, or the number of chapters gone through, rather than till we have found what we are seeking—and ultimately of doing an appointed duty, instead of pursuing an important object—these dangers, on the one side, have to be weighed against the danger on the other, that the book might go unread—that the right time might not come—that the desire might not come—that every casual interference of secular duty would put it off—in short, that the reading of the Bible would wait our leisure, and ultimately our idleness. This would be the worse evil of the two; and therefore the appointed season seems desirable; for all at least, but those whose condition and state of

mind render this neglect impossible. But while I assent to this prescription of hours, from a conviction that nature is not to be trusted, I feel that the spiritual mind cannot be shackled by it. While it remains as a check in times of distance and distraction, it will be forgotten when the heart is tuned to piety. They who want happiness cannot wait the appointed time to look for it—they who are walking in a perilous path cannot wait a prescribed hour to consult the way-marks. It is impossible. While the winds are blowing, and the waves are breaking, and the rocks and shoals are at hand, will the mariner wait the striking of the hour to observe his compass and consult his charts? It cannot be; and the heart that has not discovered this, has something yet to learn of the value and importance of the Holy Scriptures.

In the public reading, in which I include family reading of the holy text, progressive order is perhaps desirable. Individual feelings cannot in this case be consulted; and to go regularly through the books, or certain selected books, ensures the presenting of every part in turn, and provides against ignorance of anything God has thought proper to impart; for to say there is any portion of Scripture that needs

not to be known, is, I think, too much presumption. In private, I do not think this systematic reading is desirable. Of the many objects we have in view in searching the Scriptures, it appears to me that knowledge is the only purpose likely to be subserved by this mode of reading. I admit this is a most important object ; and to attain it some mode of studying the Bible for spiritual, as we study other books for secular information, may well be recommended, particularly to those whose knowledge is yet but small of God and of his ways. But this study, in which regular progress is desirable, and the reading of the whole quite necessary, I would consider as quite distinct and apart from the devotional reading of Scripture—the daily food, the daily medicine, to strengthen and refresh the spirit. This should surely be not the chapter that happens to come next, the page where the ribbon is in—but whatever part will best answer to the desires and necessities of the moment. Of this I shall speak again.

I have before alluded to the disposition of the weak and ignorant, and unstable in religion, to have recourse to commentaries, under the idea that they cannot understand the text. Commentaries are very valuable ; and we have some which to despise would be presumptuous.

Not for a moment would I be understood to depreciate them. But I must repeat my apprehension, for I know it well grounded, that many persons are in danger of preferring the commentary to the text, and giving less attention to God's word than to man's explanation of it. I have seen the tender growth of spirituality withering under this substitution of terrestrial for celestial light; and tracing the effects to their source, I have found that what began in a laudable desire to be assisted, ended in the transfer of all confidence and all inquiry from God to man. Let us have recourse to commentaries to explain any text that seems to us obscure; to apply any text that we know not what use to make of; to resolve any critical or historic difficulty that occurs to us. Let them be our helps, particularly, when in search of Biblical knowledge. But if we find the sacred text become dull, difficult, and unimpressive, without a commentary, it is time to suspect ourselves. Something very wrong must be in the feeling—it must not go on, lest it end in that fatal preference I have described. It is the propensity of nature not only to take by preference that which is evil, but to convert into evil in the using that which itself is good. Thus nothing can be more valuable than the

assistance one man's experience can impart to another; the knowledge and wisdom collected and collated for our use, by those who have gone the path of faith before us: and nothing but our own incaution can convert this store of wholesome provision into an enfeebling and dangerous aliment. By all means I would commend the use of commentaries, when we feel we can be assisted by them; but not at all times—not as if the Bible had no force or sense without them. This is a dangerous feeling to encourage, and false as it is dangerous; the word of God is and ever will be sufficient for the work whereto he sends it; and the finest commentary that ever was written, or all of them united, falls short of the meaning the experienced Christian finds in the first simple words in which the Holy Spirit dictated the text.

Others have considered that it is better to make the Scripture its own interpreter; reading it, instead of a commentary, with the marginal references, and thus pursuing the text to its extent of meaning, by reference to others that bear upon it. I have no doubt that great knowledge of the Bible, and very accurate perception of its meaning, may be acquired in this way—better, perhaps, than by any other method whatever: for all the errors that have

professed to derive themselves from the Bible, have arisen from taking some parts of it to the exclusion of others.

The method, however, which, in addition and in preference to all or any of these, I would recommend to the inquiring Christian, is what I should call the devotional reading of the Scriptures. At appointed seasons, or when the heart suggests it, disposed to it or not disposed, understanding or not understanding, let them daily read it—shall I say on their knees? I do not know why I should not—for it is the posture of devotion—and if the posture were not a help to devotion, I suppose it would not have been universally adopted and commended. But, at least, in the same manner as they would compose their minds for prayer, entering upon it with the same feelings, and with similar intent.

The first thing necessary to this is to impress the mind with a sense of God's presence while we read. We know, as a matter of credence, that God is always present with us; but to have a perpetual sense and remembrance of this is a high attainment, and can be boasted only by persons of very deep devotion. Therefore, when we pray, we are accustomed to consider ourselves as going to God, as presenting

ourselves before him, and claiming, as it were, his more direct attention to what we come about. It is this feeling of entering into the immediate presence of the Deity I would have induced, in order to read his word with a devotional spirit.

The next essential is a desire—not a general, but a particular desire, for something definite, which in the Bible we expect to find. I have before said, that the objects of our reading are three—Knowledge, Holiness, and Happiness. But these three may be subdivided into a thousand: and it would be well, that when we set about to read, we know exactly what we wish to be informed of—what sin we desire to have removed, or in what point of conduct require to be directed—what suffering we would have a cure for, or what blessing would obtain. Is it said that at the time we may not happen to have any definite desire, and yet it would not be well to delay the reading? We have already spoken of those who have no object in reading the Bible but to fulfil a duty of which they do not feel the utility, neither expect from it any benefit. To them we can but say, read on till you do, and pray that you may; for till then the Scriptures are a useless letter to you. But if there be any who wish

to be benefited by the perusal, and believe that they might be, and yet do not know what it is they want or may expect—there is a desire at once definable—let their object be to find out what they want, and what the text contains, and, for the present, let that be the direct purpose for which they go to the perusal. But if the soul is really awakened to a concern for itself, this cannot long be the case. Desires, necessities, demands, will multiply a thousand fold, and from day to day become more urgent : succeeding each other in restless rapidity. Of these, some one or other will prevail, according as we are at the time under the influence of external circumstances or inward emotions ; and nothing but a want of self-examination, and a culpable ignorance of what passes in our hearts, can prevent our knowing which it is that at the moment predominates. If, however, there should be any such days of insensibility to the pious reader, the best object of pursuit for that time would be a cure for the dissipation or the pre-occupation of mind which has so completely withdrawn it from self-observation. In this manner every impediment to the reading of Scripture would become itself an object of perusing it. For the most part, I believe, the predominant desire will be sufficiently im-

portunate to make itself both felt and understood.

Another requisite to the devotional reading of the word, as indeed to all devotion, is that we remember always there must be a third between ourselves and God. Our prayer could never have gone up to him without an Intercessor—his will can never descend into our hearts without an interpreter. Jesus is the intercessor between us and the Father—the Holy Spirit is the interpreter to us of his will. When, therefore, we would either offer or receive, these must be remembered and their aid obtained. Without the assistance of the Divine Spirit, the Bible cannot be understood by the most wise and learned—with it the peasant and the child will find his intellect enough to compass it. It is not sufficient to admit this as a speculative truth, and then forget it. There must be a genuine conviction of our incapability, an honest belief of assistance to be given to all who ask it; and this must be called to mind whenever we go about the task. I fear it is very generally forgotten, or virtually disbelieved; which accounts for much of the ill-success complained of in perusing the word of God.

SECTION FOURTH.

THE SPIRIT WITH WHICH THE HOLY SCRIPTURES
SHOULD BE READ.

WHEN I have said we should go to the perusal of the Holy Scriptures with a consciousness of God's immediate presence, it seems scarcely necessary to add, that we should go to it with an honest and a perfect heart. 'Much, I believe, of the unsuccessfulness, the want of interest and want of profit complained of by the readers, arises from the want of an honest purpose. They do not mean to find, they would rather not find, what they go to look for—or they are perhaps determined not to believe it, if they do.

Is it asked, who has a perfect heart to bring with them?—assuredly none, if by perfect, we understand a sinless heart. I mean not to say, that any degree of sinfulness should prevent our entering on our devotional reading; not even if it should be the present feeling of improper or unholy passions; not though we should be at that moment under the consciousness of rebellion and disobedience to God, of

anger or injustice towards others, of pride, of ambitious wishes, and dispositions wholly earthly. Rather is there the more reason we should hasten to our Bible to get wisdom, to get reproof, to get shame for our unholiness, and strength to contend with our corruptions. To the perfect, sinless heart, if any such there were, the Bible would scarcely be necessary. Still it is a Scripture expression, and must mean something. I believe it means a simple heart, an entire heart; one single in principle, single in its object and desires; undivided in its choice of heaven, undivided in its trust in Jesus, and undivided in its determination to resist sin, and pursue holiness. This is that pure and perfect heart so often spoken of in Scripture. This was the perfectness of Paul's heart, when he gloried even in his infirmities, and looked upon the very imperfections that humiliated him, as tending to his ultimate perfection. This was the perfectness of Peter's heart—Peter, who but a few days before had abandoned and denied his Master, when he called Omniscience to witness that he loved him. And this was the perfectness of Job, and the perfectness of David, to which, in the midst of his penitence, he appeals so often. The seed by divine grace implanted, is a perfect seed. It grows up among many thorns—it needs the

daily dews, the daily sunbeams from above—many a bleak wind will blow on it, shiver its branches, and haply blight its flowers—if left uncared for and unwatched, it would shrink and die. Still it is a perfect principle ; and the heart in which it is implanted, is an honest one with all its loathed corruption and its hated sins ; because it would part from everything, and suffer everything to be made holy.

With an honest and a perfect heart, then, we should go to the perusal of God's Sacred Word. For instance, we have recourse to the Bible for knowledge. We would be better informed upon some particular points of doctrine, or upon the doctrines of the Gospel generally. The disputes of others and doubts of our own, have left our understanding at fault, and we scarcely know what we ought to believe. Wisely we refer to the written word of God, the only standard and the only test of truth. But in what mind do we open it ? Perhaps we have received our opinions from some person we esteem or some set of people we are in the habit of admiring. We are determined they shall be right. The Bible shall say nothing but what they have said, nor more nor less. If it does—we do not own as much, but in the secret of our hearts, we are determined the Bi-

ple shall not mean what it says. Perhaps, wise in our own conceits, pre-endowed with a knowledge of how things ought to be, pre-informed by reason and common sense, or something we mistake for them, of what Almighty wisdom ought to do, or is likely to do, we go to his word determined to believe nothing that is inconsistent with his goodness, his justice, his character, as we are pleased to call our gratuitous notion of his attributes and their probable manifestations; though the words of Scripture are as plain as if written with a sun-beam, we are determined to understand them in no sense, but the one we think they ought to bear.

We go to the Bible for holiness. Perhaps we do not advance so much as we desire in the ways of God. We find no increasing subjugation of our tempers or detachment of our hearts from earth—no growing love of things divine, and nearer communion with God. We would inquire what is the matter. Scripture might tell us there is a defect in our creed: we have set out wrong: we are depending too much upon ourselves, and too little on Jesus: we have not a clear view of the means of salvation, the only source whence sanctification of the heart proceeds. But, oh! we will believe nothing of all that. Doctrines cannot signify—better go on

in the path of duty, than fill the head with notions. We know many good people who believe nothing of this. We do not see at all how such doctrines should be productive of holiness. Or it may be that we desire direction in some particular points of conduct, some habits, some pursuits, some long-cherished feelings, now first suspected to be sins, some bosom gods, now first suspected to be idols. We go to the word of God—the only way-mark; but we go determined not to see which way it points. There it is; but it condemns those we love—they cannot be in the wrong. There it is; but it forbids us something we cannot by any means perceive the evil of. We have come furnished with replies, circumstances, peculiarities, expediences in abundance. In short, we come not to seek more direction, but to excuse ourselves from following that we have.

Lastly, we recur to Scripture in search of Happiness. And alas! we are not honest even there. For we come determined not to be made happy. Cares that we have deposited at our chamber doors, we are determined to take up again as soon as we emerge from them. Sorrows and regrets that we have brought with us, we are determined to take away, whatever remedy be proposed for them. Wishes, de-

sires are in our hearts, which we are determined not to relinquish, though heaven, though God himself be offered us instead.

O let us see, before we presume to open our Bibles in the presence of God and on our knees before him, that all this falseness be not in our hearts. For if it is, what have we to expect? God, into whose presence we have come with so much form of reverence, whose attention we have called, as it were, to our devotional perusal of his word—his word immutable, eternal, and the only truth—God, who cannot be deceived and who nothing overlooks of human secresy—what should he think of such strange applicants, determined not to see what they pretend to look for, determined not to find what they pretend to seek, and not to have what they came on purpose to obtain? If his gracious endurance bears with such strange folly, it is more indeed than it deserves. With favour he cannot look on it—answer he cannot deign to it—with blessings he cannot bless it. He filleth the hungry with good things, but the rich he sends empty away. These applicants, so rich in other men's wisdom and their own—these supplicants have come so finely clothed—nay, they have come armed—they have brought arguments for his arguments, reasons against

his reasons, purposes for his purposes. They have brought the opinions of some miserable being of the earth, to measure by them the sayings of Omniscience. They have brought the example of some slave of sin, to try by it the precepts of his holy law. They have brought the world to judge its Maker. It did so once when in the perfection of humanity he appeared before it, and found him guilty. It does so still. The tribunal of Pilate is not the only place where Deity has stood arraigned before the creature; it is done in our houses, in our chambers, in our hearts: and the world's judgment ever has and ever will find its Maker in the wrong.

Surely, if anything of this dishonesty be in our bosoms during the perusal of the Holy Scriptures, there is little cause to wonder that we derive no good from it. Well has that Scripture said, "Study as little children"—with hearts as simple, as credulous, as ignorant—the babe disputing with its teacher over the sounds of the alphabet, would not be so absurd, as the mind of man bringing his own reasonings and prejudices against the word of God.

Whenever we open the Bible, then, we must endeavour to have a firm persuasion, and a present recollection that it is God's own word.

Without denying it, there seems to want in many minds a practical certainty of this fact. Do not take it for granted, without examination, that you believe this. Is it what David says, what Paul says, what the Bible says, that you are reading? Or is it before you consciously as what God says? This is a very subtle unbelief. It betrays itself in conversation very frequently, and I am afraid it lurks very secretly sometimes in the bosom. The consequences are obvious. Paul or David might mistake—they might express themselves unadvisedly—they might not foresee the misuse that would be made of their expression—they might venture things true, but expedient—they might speak under circumstances that, if known, would give quite a different purport to their words: and we find ourselves perpetually reasoning as if this could have been the case.

It is not within my design to prove, that the Bible is the word of God. I must take it for granted that our readers believe, or think they believe it to be so; offering only a word of caution that they do not deceive themselves. Suppose, for example, you are shown in the Bible these plain words—"Love not the world, neither the things of the world"—"If any man love the world, the love of Christ is not in him."

You say that cannot be. It never was intended we should give up any of the enjoyments of life for the sake of religion—it is impossible to live in the world without being anxious and troubled about the things of the world—it is altogether natural and quite proper we should contend for its great things and good things, its wealth, its honours, its applause, for ourselves and our families—we must do as others do, so long as we are here—the world is of as much importance to us as to others. Then do you believe those are the words of God? You answer, Yes; but God does not mean this. Do you suppose, then, that God should say what he does not mean? No; but he may be misunderstood—he meant something else—he meant that we should not love what is sinful in the world. But if God meant this, why did he not say it? When he condescends to use the language of humanity, to make known his will to men, do you suppose he will not use the plainest, and such as may best express his meaning? You will perceive, if you examine the actings of your mind, that you have already forgotten it is God who speaks—you are arguing as you justly might were these the words of man. Or take another instance. It is written, “The children of God must not strive.”

These are plain words, admitting of but one sense; and making no exceptions to the positive prohibitions they contain. If they are the words of God, all strife, all quarrelling, contending, disputing, and caballing, is forbidden. Yet is it not common amongst us both to do these things and to defend them? To talk of a becoming spirit, a quick sense of injury, an impatience of contradiction, and eager vindication of our rights, as if they were almost virtues; and when this text is proposed, to answer that we cannot help our temper, that we must not suffer ourselves to be offended with impunity, and must contend for what is due to us as well as others? Then has God spoken in vain, or these are not his words. I have chosen these texts as the first that occur to memory. Whenever you feel disposed to dispute against any part of the Bible, examine yourself if this is not the process your mind is performing; for among those who think they believe the Bible to be the word of God, there are many, very many, I fear, who believe one half of it to mean nothing, and the other half to mean the exact opposite to what it says. Why should God speak at all if this were so? He might have left his servants to fill a book with guesses and mistakes, uncertain precepts, and equivocal

truths. Be satisfied, when you open the Sacred Book, and let the recollection of it be ever present that it is the word of God himself—of course true—of course consistent—of course irrevocable—and of course, since it is the only revelation of his will that he has made to man, intended to enlighten, not to puzzle you. This, with the recollection of God's presence with you while you read, will go far to produce a right state of mind for the study of his word. For surely thus you will perceive the folly of bringing with you any of those excuses, arguments, opinions, examples, circumstances, and expediences, with which you have presumed to answer the words of Scripture ; as if it had not been written by one who knew them, and foresaw them all, and would have noticed them, had they been of any importance in his sight or made any difference to his designs. If you are not able immediately to perceive the meaning of the more obscure doctrinal passages, you will feel the necessity of believing all that you do perceive ; though it should be contrary to every opinion you have formed before, and contrary to what you have desired in your heart to find it. Those parts which regard the conduct and disposition, which are invariably plain, simple, and unequivocal, you will receive as de

cisive upon whatever subject you have consulted them, though they should condemn yourself, and all around you ; assured that if the precepts had been unnecessary, they would not have been given ; and if there had been times and circumstances in which they were to be reversed, it would have been specified: to suppose otherwise, is to make God more unwise and improvident than any earthly legislature ; for wherever general laws are promulgated, if exceptions are intended, care is taken to make them understood.

For those treasures so abundant of peace and joy contained in the Holy Scriptures--“ Ye drunken, but not with wine,” “ Ye tossed with tempests, and not comforted,” “ Children of sorrow, wasted with misery,” why do you find nothing where there is all, and die for lack in the midst of profusion ? Because you have not an honest and a perfect heart. If, when you lay your hand upon that sacred Book, you would remember it is the word of Him, who is the Giver and disposer of all things, who is not a man that he should mistake, nor a son of man that he should change—and when you uncloset it, if you would remember that His look is upon your heart, and his eye in the depths of your bosom—you would not venture, I think,

to bring those idols with you, for whose sakes your spirits are broken—nor those schemes of earthliness, nor that sensitiveness of pride, nor that careful value for the things that perish—ingredients of the cup of whose bitterness you complain. You would not persist in calling that blessed, which God has not blessed, and that a curse, to which his sweetest promises are pledged; nor hold that impossible, which he has said shall be, or that necessary, which he has said nay to. You would not bring your broken cisterns to the fountain, and wonder why they hold no water—the madness of thousands, who persist in gathering of a tree the fruits it never bore: and from winter to summer, and from year to year, wait and wait, and wonder that their thistles still bear thorns. This cannot God himself accomplish for you, that you should taste sweetness in the wormwood's juice? Bring the bosom desert, and he will make it blossom as the rose—bring it rank, and overrun with weeds, he will root them out, and plant the vine and olive in their stead. There is happiness in that sacred Book; but it is happiness of God's devising, not of man's.



SECTION FIFTH.

THE SELECTION OF SUITABLE PARTS OF SCRIPTURE FOR PERUSAL.

WITH a mind unclothed of its own wisdom and its own folly, willing to forego alike its weakness and its strength, and like a simple and unlearned child to listen and believe whatever has been written—with a heart honest in pursuit of Knowledge, Holiness, and Happiness, and persuaded it may be found in the written word of God—with a consciousness of God's presence, a sense of immediate want, and a sensible expectation of the Spirit's influence, if I take daily this Holy Book, alone and on my knees, where shall I open it? What shall I read in it?

I have before mentioned, promising to revert to the subject, that I do not think a progressive order of reading to be in this sense desirable. I take it for granted we have such a general acquaintance with the Scripture, as to know the purport and character of the different books, so as to enable us to select from among them

such as are suitable to the object we have in view. We know, for instance, the character of the Psalms, of the Books of Moses, of the Prophets, the Gospels, and the Epistles, as they are different and distinct from each other. In that in which each Psalm or each chapter differs in character from the rest, if we are not sufficiently versed in the Scripture to know, or have not sufficient memory to recall them, the heads usually given in our Bibles, or the eye cast carefully over the page, will quickly point out to us what we are in search of. A few minutes spent in looking for something to suit us, will not be ill employed: we may find something by the way that suits us also, though we were not looking for it, and thus get a benefit the more.

There are two characters in the divine Word that afford exhaustless admiration to the reflective mind—its perfect unity, and its infinite variety. So perfect the one that there is nothing which consists not, nothing that harmonizes not, nothing that contravenes or contradicts, or even so much as betrays a separate purpose or an unconnected end. The other so infinite, that amid the hourly change of circumstances, feelings, habits, and desires, to which our mortal being is subjected, to every

possible state and condition of mind, there are parts peculiarly and designedly adapted. It is common to us to say, that it seems as if such and such a chapter had been exclusively addressed to ourselves, as if it had been written on purpose to meet our case. And so in fact it is. Omniscience at a glance beheld every case, and every circumstance, and every doubt, and every desire that ever the bosom of his creatures could conceive; and addressed himself to it in particular, and answered it in particular, and adapted some portion of his word to the individual case. Such is the measure of his wisdom. Such is the treasure-house he has filled with his abundant stores. But man comes, and comes, and finds nothing in it that he wants, nothing worth carrying away. When he goes to the market, he knows what business he goes upon—he seeks his object, gives it his attention, and does not return till he has done his errand. When he goes to the bazaar, he knows what he wants—he sees the thing that will suit him, and carries it away with him. When he comes to the Bible, this store of heaven's providing, so full of everything most needful and most precious, he gapes about, he knows not his own errand—he reads and reads, counts his chapters, looks at his watch, and goes away—

he takes nothing, for he wanted nothing—he has done his business for to-day and will come again to-morrow.

As in the natural world the beneficent Creator has provided not merely for the necessities and enjoyments of men in general, but provided, as it were, for every difference of taste, habit and constitution—one aliment for the vigorous, another for the weak—one pleasure for the rude, another for the refined—one atmosphere for the healthful, another for the sick—one pursuit for youth, and another for age—and all in such variety, that the very changes of our fancy may please themselves in the abundance—so in the riches of his grace, the beneficent Redeemer has made the characters of his book to vary, that every one at all times may be suited. And while all in itself is equally good, and no part of the Bible can be said to be better, or more valuable, or more beautiful than the rest, it will be found that every spiritual mind had its favourite part, changing as its own condition changes. The rest will not be neglected ; but still this favourite portion will be reverted to most frequently. At some times the argumentative epistles of St. Paul will have the greatest interest ; at other times, the penitential breathing of the tried and chastened David ; and at

others again, the holy precepts and examples of Jesus himself, as contained in the narrative of the Gospels. From the varying character of these divine writings I am persuaded it was intended this should be so; and that it consists with the design of God, that we should enjoy different parts at different times, according to the progress we have made, and the path in which we are led. Ere the way be ended, we shall have found the beauty and utility of all.

In this persuasion it is, that I do not advise any enforced, progressive order in our daily devotional reading, but such a selection as feeling and preference at the time suggest; dictated, as it will be in the honest mind, by the time's necessities and need. When the mind is agitated and in doubt about the way of salvation, which the powerful reasoning of St. Paul, or the persuasive arguments of John might possibly elucidate and set at rest, what but a greater distraction would be to me the enjoyments of the path I cannot find, or the pictures of its blissful termination? When the heart is full of joyful confidence, and wants only to know how it may glorify and obey, why must I read, instead of the hallowed precepts of the sermon on the Mount, the mourning of Job in the days of his affliction? Why should the

humbled, penitent, and broken spirit, waiting one beam of comfort from above, be set to read threatenings of God on his obdurate enemies; while the heart, as yet untouched with sorrow and quite strange to tears, finds nothing in the day's portion but the breathings of despair, and the promises of heaven to the afflicted? The unfitness of such a division of our daily portion is quite obvious. Yet this must be perpetually the case, if we are to read chapter after chapter, in regular order as they stand, instead of selecting what seems to us immediately desirable.

Perhaps it may appear that I am assuming more knowledge of the heart and its occasions, than the young and inexperienced in religion are likely to have attained, when I thus advise them to select their own medicine, their own food. Certainly I am supposing the heart to be honest in pursuit of its own good, and to have carefully examined itself, as I have before advised, and define to itself the particular object of the day's reading. It does not appear to me that this is more impossible to the young than to the experienced Christian. A thorough knowledge of the heart, with all its dark and deceitful mazes, is indeed the result of long experience, and never will be acquired perfectly,

till the mortal shall have put on immortality. But to detect the present symptoms of the occult disease, the present craving of the unsated appetite, needs but reflection, and an honest purpose, with such guidance from above as may ever be expected to attend it.

When the part of Scripture has been determined on, whatever strangeness there may seem in the remark, I am decidedly of opinion that we had better read little than much. Can we read too much Scripture? By no means. Let us read it ten times a day, or all day, if inclination suggest it, and we have a good purpose in view in doing so. But I am persuaded that it is better to read a little at a time, to read that little again and again, pause upon it, consider it, and carry it away upon the mind, than to pass from subject to subject, chapter to chapter, and thus not concentrate the thoughts on any passage in particular. I can imagine cases in which a single verse would be a better exercise of devotional study, than even one whole chapter. But I would count neither verses nor chapters. A better measurement will suggest itself, if the heart be really interested. You do not come to read—you come to seek, to inquire, to enjoy. Pursue your purpose, and it will direct you where to stop. The reason I say it

should be little is this. The passage that strikes you, that seems to suit your need, should be studied, contemplated, digested—not read. It should be returned to a second time, a third time, or a fourth. Its beauty will grow with every fresh perusal—its value will be enhanced at every retrospect—new meanings, new blessings will grow up in it, while your mind rests upon the words. At every sentence you should pause to consider not only its intrinsic meaning, but its application to yourself, to your circumstances and desires. Very often a particular sentence or expression will give rise to a train of reflection, that will carry you far, and hold you long in meditation, but should by no means be checked or arrested. If it have excited doubts, wait to examine them—if joy, wait to indulge it—if any other sensation, do not be in haste to get rid of it by reading on, but let the mind have time to realize and mature its impressions; that so they may remain the comfort, the warning, or the guide of the ensuing day. The habitual reading will thus be rather the consideration than the perusal of a portion of Scripture; and I do not hesitate to say, that any mind really thus intently set, would very soon have had enough, as much as it could bear. Some words of deepest import would

very soon seize upon us, and forbid all further progress—some deep feeling would engross our powers, and bear the heart to heaven, and leave no freedom to pursue the text. The eye would not be satisfied with seeing, nor the ear with hearing the beautiful secrets of this word divine, and both remain suspended on the hallowed page. Fiction has told us of one who, at the sight of her own image in the stream, stood transfixed with wonder and admiration. With an emotion not unlike, though different in the effect, the Christian stands frequently amazed to find the deepest secrets of his bosom reflected, as it were, in the pages of Holy Writ—every thought and feeling portrayed, repeated, answered, explained, and accounted for. “This answer is to my question, this thought is mine, this character is me”—thus whispers the spirit to itself as it proceeds; realizing, owning, claiming everything, as the intimate acquaintance of the bosom. They who have not felt this at all, have not begun to understand the Bible. They by whom much of it is as yet unclaimed, though to its plainer parts the heart responds, have only to go on. Every day will disclose a new assimilation, realize a new truth, give meaning to some dark passage; as every day adds to their experience, and deepens their

knowledge of themselves. And as long as life endures, there will be more discoveries to make, more truths to be acknowledged, and more similitudes to be verified.

But there is one thing of first importance in our perusal of Scripture, which as yet I have not named ; an added reason, as it appears to me, why the portion at each time should be small, and the progress through it deliberate. I have said, that when we read, we should put the mind, if not the body also, in a position of prayer. But this is not enough. Actual, fervent prayer must accompany our reading. There are many and powerful reasons why this should be, and why our reading can scarcely be efficacious without it ; arising from our ignorance, helplessness, and corruption. Paul had regard to this necessity of our condition, when he told us to pray without ceasing. He knew that in the most ordinary occupations of life, we could not go on securely or successfully without perpetual reference and appeal to heaven ; and as he saw no moment of suspension to our need, so he would have none to our prayers. If this be true in the occupations of our secular estate, much more it is true in an employment that immediately concerns our

spiritual and eternal welfare, an occupation so serious and important as that we speak of.

First, we cannot understand the text without divine assistance. Sin has besotted our intellect, and where the things of God are concerned, bereft us of all natural understanding. We can apprehend nothing without help. Then, if we do understand the word, and apprehend the meaning, it is of no use to us—we cannot fulfil its precepts, grow better by its influence, be comforted by its promises, or take possession of its treasures, unless God interpose his power to enable us. Incessant, momentary appeal, therefore, should be made to Heaven as we proceed. We have understood ourselves to be come more immediately into his presence—we have called upon him to be a party, as it were, to our study of his word—he is at hand to answer and to hear. His gracious attention is fixed on the secret movements of our heart. There is no need to use words—that might interrupt our meditative reading—the passing thought, the hasty aspiration, is sufficient. O God, grant me this! make me this! be this to me! confirm, avert, prevent, direct, bestow!—assents, confessions, praises—All these, with the rapidity of thought, have to pass between the soul and God, while the eye

peruses, and the spirit meditates his word. I know not whether those who complain of so little benefit derived from their periodical reading, and so little enjoyment in it, have been in the habit of neglecting this necessary accompaniment of prayer; but I am persuaded, no great measure of profit can result to us without it, however diligent our application to the text. The half of the Bible, indeed, or a great part of it, are the words of prayer; addresses, in one form or another, to its divine author. How are these to be perused, but with a praying spirit? They are not the prayers of Moses, of David, of Paul, preserved for our information. They are the cries of every conscious sinner—the wants of every child of humanity—the desires of every heart that has been awakened by the same spirit of grace that animated the bosom of Moses, Paul, and David. They should be read in the manner of addresses from ourselves to God, with a deep Amen of a responding heart. The remainder of the text is narrative, doctrine, or counsel—a personal concern to us, every word of it. It is not for Joseph's sake, or Hezekiah's, that the narrative of their lives is preserved; but for the glory of God, and the instruction of every member of his church, till all be perfected in him. They

are useless to us as our nursery legends, unless we so apply them ; and if we do, we must at every moment feel the interference of Heaven necessary. In their sufferings we see our dangers, in their sins we see our corruptions, in their conduct our duties, and in their triumph our exalted hopes. How can we proceed on such a path without resting on God as we advance ; without stopping every moment to be sure that he is with us, to guide, protect, and encourage us ? I am inclined to think the heart that *can* read the Bible at any time without accompanying prayer, has yet but very little depth of spiritual affections nor much of earnestness in Divine things. But if any have this habit, and find no impulsive necessity to devotion while they read, I would advise them by every effort to induce it. I would advise them to abstain from, and altogether forbid themselves the reading of chapter after chapter, story after story ; as they would read any other book, to know what people said and did some hundred years ago, without any such deep-felt concern as must force their hearts to prayer. It can but confirm the spirit's stupor. Instead of it, let them task themselves, if at first it must be a task, to this meditative, prayerful reading of small portions of the Scriptures

daily ; till their insensible and careless bosoms shall be by degrees accustomed to feel and to desire while they read.

It is my intention, in the ensuing Sections, to offer some assistance to the inexperienced in this manner of perusing the different parts of the Bible : a plan, however, which I pursue with much doubtfulness ; while I see the purpose to be useful, feeling in no way assured that I can usefully accomplish it.

SECTION SIXTH.

THE READING OF THE HISTORIC SCRIPTURES.

It is when our minds are more particularly in search of knowledge we shall feel disposed to turn to the historic parts of the Old Testament. Most necessary indeed they are, to enlighten our understanding, and clear away the mystery in which we find ourselves enveloped, on first awaking from the stupor of thoughtlessness and indifference. And not at first only. To the end of time we continue to be at intervals arrested and astounded at the contradictions and incongruities that are within us and around us ; and are fain to have recourse to the divine explanation of man's first fall and disobedience, its circumstances and effects with all the after-haps of this bad beginning ; and the way and the purpose in which the world has been since prevented from becoming a consistent whole of wickedness and misery. The progress of God's mercy and man's iniquity, those two great sources of seeming confusion—for it is confusion only to our imperfect vision—can alone

explain the mystery that involves the character and the fate of man. And with the habit some of us have of forgetting, in our estimate of things, the fact of man's entire corruption and departure from the presence of God, calculating, reasoning, and feeling as if no such thing had been the case, it appears to me that a frequent reference to the first chapters of Genesis can be no unprofitable reading; especially when the mind is excited by a sort of curiosity about our condition, or, it may be, of doubt as to the justness of God's dealings with us. The apostles in their discourses often found it necessary to refer to the beginning, in order to understand the issue.

Also, it is very useful to meditate these narrative passages, when we need to be reminded—and what do we need oftener? to whom this aged world of ours belongs; who governs it, and takes account of all that passes in it. That man rules in the world, and God has forgotten it, is the habit of thinking of more minds than suspect themselves of it. The frequent repetitions of “The Lord said”—“The Lord commanded — ‘The Lord caused’”—while they afford the sweetest consolation and assurance to the pious mind, delighted to see God in everything, may serve as a reminding and a warn-

ing to those who are in the habit of settling and arranging their worldly affairs without him—as if they might—as if they could. For this purpose of calling to mind the immediate observation and interference of God with the affairs of his people, the small things as well as great things that concern them, we can scarcely open the historic Scriptures in the wrong place. If we but find the name of an individual, and go on to see what is narrated of him, with due reflection, we shall see him the subject of supernal power, impelled or prevented, overlooked and disposed of at every step; and reflection passing from him upon ourselves, we shall be left with no more hope of escaping the interference of Heaven, than of fear to look for it in vain.

Another occasion in which the narrative part of the Old Testament is peculiarly useful, is when the mind is under a sort of rebellious disbelief, or at least a disturbed assent, as to the actual punishment of sin according to the threats denounced against it. Tender and sensitive minds, not fully cognizant as yet of the real nature of sin, and misled by feeling to see more beauty in one attribute of God than in another, are peculiarly liable to this disturbance of their faith. They find it very difficult

to believe that God will fulfil his threats upon the wicked and impenitent. Now, however amiable may be the feeling in which this doubt originates, it is a measure of infidelity in the positive declarations of God ; and calculated to lessen the horror and the dread of sin. It must by all means be repressed : and when the mind is agitated by such doubts, we cannot do better than refer to the narrative of ancient times, to learn whether God is or is not a God of vengeance, exercising fearful mastery over those that oppose him. However fastidious taste or affected sensibility may take offence at the horrors recorded in the Old Testament, there they are—and it was God himself who placed them there—and they are there for our perusal and instruction. They are to confirm to us by his actions the verity of his words ; that we may cease to set our poor conceptions of mercy and humanity against his positive declarations, and be convinced of what his wrath will do, by what it has done. Need I point out the places ? The indiscriminate vengeance of the flood—the destruction, too partial, as we might think, of the cities of the plain, not more corrupt perhaps than others—the punishment of Kora—the murders of Makkedah—the fate of individuals, of Jezebel, of Sisera, and of Nebuchadnezzar.

As we read them, does not the heart grow confounded within us at the weakness of its own suggestions, appalled at the certainty of God's vengeance, ashamed at the disturbance of our faith, and confirmed in hatred to the sin that can provoke, and, as it were, compel from hand benign such bitter strokes of vengeance?

Another, and most essential purpose to which we can apply the biography of the Old Testament, is that which we perpetually need, perpetually demand—example. The connection between conduct and its effects, between vice and misery, piety and blessedness, are among those secrets of the Almighty which he has, in a great measure, veiled from observation, amid the seeming disorder of existing things. Folly seems to gather of the tree she plants not, while wisdom comes short of her harvest. The path of rectitude seems to lead to evil, and the way of evil to success. In contemplation of these things, the spirit becomes sometimes so mazed and bewildered among the apparent opposition between actions and their results, it can no more perceive the path of wisdom—it takes the right timidly, or the wrong from expediency, and waits doubtfully and uncertainly the issue of its choice. God, for reasons that his wisdom knows, permits these false seemings

to remain. No man knows the whole of another's fate, the actual measure of another's good and ill; and no man, till he reaches eternity, can know the actual results of his own actions, or his own destiny. But what we cannot find in living testimony, that the child of God may never want a guide, a warning, or an encouragement, has been most amply provided in these hallowed pages. Characters of every description have been portrayed, and placed in every variety of circumstances. The secrets of hearts, as God alone beheld them, have been laid open. Their motives, and the conduct they produced, are at once disclosed, together with the divine judgment of them, and all the consequent results of good and evil. And in these we behold a beautiful consistency of truth, which doubtless we should behold in the fate of every individual in existence, could we know of them all that the divine biographer discloses. It should be enough that we behold it here, to make us believe it everywhere. Here is no confusion, no uncertainty—no gain by folly, no ultimate loss by wisdom—no piety unrewarded, nor sin unpunished. And this, be it remembered, is the only perfect biography that has been or can be written. When, therefore, we need to be instructed how to act, warned

against the wrong, and encouraged to the right, we shall find in the narratives of the Old Testament a study of exhaustless beauty and utility. We may make choice of the character that seems to come nearest to our own, or to have stood in circumstances the nearest to the position in which we find ourselves. We may compare their expressions and the sayings of their hearts, with the conscious emotions of our own. We may observe how they decided under similar difficulties, how they felt under similar temptations, or how they were rescued from similar embarrassments. And we may find in God's judgment upon their character, his judgment upon ours: and thus be instructed what to pursue and what to shun; and with no small certainty, what to expect—for equal are his ways; obscured, as he has suffered them to be for a season, by the inequality of ours. Need I mention Abraham, in the various trials of his faith, or Joseph and his brethren, amidst their changing fortunes, or the alternate sinnings and repentings of the chosen people, followed ever by their due rewards?

There are times when the racked spirit seems beyond the reach of abstract argument, and sinking beneath its sorrows or its fears, is too weak to receive comfort from the general

promises of divine assistance and support. Whether the Deity can, whether he will, whether he does hear the sufferer's prayers, is a doubt that at some moments defies all remonstrance and all reasoning to appease it. How inestimably valuable at such moments are the simple facts of the Bible narrative! God's word and promise ought to supply as ample a certainty as any fulfilment of them that can be presented to us; but in the actual weakness of our faith they do not. There are few, I should think, who have made the Bible their resource in times of need, but have found that while the heart resisted the comfort proposed by the general promises of divine interference, it has been sweetly cheered by the fulfilment of them in behalf of others. There can be no impossibilities in the way of our desires, no dangers on our path, greater than he has overcome in answer to the prayers of his people; so that whenever our hearts are full of desire, but doubtful and unexpectant in their aspirations, we shall find most holy and suitable reading in almost every part of the Historic Scriptures; where in plain facts, if we believe the words, we see everything realized that God has promised or that we can need. Have we not the prayers of Moses and of David, of Hezekiah and

of the Shunamite, with the answers in word and deed returned to them from heaven?

This I have spoken of the historic books, as they are merely narrative, apart from any spiritual meaning concealed under the facts, and from the beautiful morsels of spiritual matter dispersed throughout the story. I have considered them in that character of history, in which they would seem the least suited to our moments of private and personal devotion. But this is in fact the exclusive character of but a small portion of the Bible narrative. Very many of the stories convey truths to which they make no allusion, and are replete with analogies which the spiritually instructed mind delights to trace in them. When the soul is deeply imbued with the principles of the Gospel, and Jesus has become the centre, the beginning, and the end of everything, he will be looked for where he is not named, and perceived in every part of Holy Writ. There is a state of religious progress, when this single object of faith and affection does so possess the soul, that to whatever page we turn, whatever narrative we read, it speaks or seems to speak to us of Christ. We see him in Moses, in Job, in everything. We cannot see him or seek for him too much. If we apply to Christ some passage that was not

so meant, we have done no harm; if we fail to see him where he might be found, we have robbed the passage of its greatest beauty ! But this will hardly be the tone of an inexperienced mind; if forced upon us, it might become speculative or critical research. This, in our devotional reading, we would particularly discourage. There are other times. Biblical criticism is by no means a forbidden or a useless study: but let it be a study; and by no means intrude itself on these moments of devotional reading. Let us be satisfied now with the plain sense of the passage, as far as a simple mind is capable of perceiving it, with such spiritual applications as we find ourselves readily able to make, and any more recondite and typical sense, that experience and previous study may enable us to attach to it. So limited are the mental powers in our present state, the moment we begin to criticise, we cease to feel.

Hidden and uncertain meanings apart, many of the stories of the Old Testament have a meaning clearly and strikingly spiritual, and bear an analogy, too evident to be overlooked by the plainest understanding, to the plan of salvation exhibited in the Gospel. Such is the trial of Abraham's faith—such the breathings of the royal Psalmist—and such, most striking-

ly, the whole history of God's chosen people; every circumstance of which the experienced believer finds to be realized in his own rescue from the bondage of iniquity, and subsequent passage through the wilderness of life. On this account certain chapters and passages of the Pentateuch are, and ever will be, a favourite resource to the tried and trusting Christian; and it is desirable they should be so to the more bold and careless; lest seeming to travel towards the promised land, they too perish in the wilderness. I would advise a frequent reference to the history of Israel, when the mind feels disposed to it, with a direct application of their hopes and fears, their dangers and encouragements, the warnings, judgments, promises, and manifestations of God towards them, to our spiritual travel towards the eternal Canaan. There is no doubt that it was so intended. The same God who separated them from a corrupt world, has separated us, if indeed we are travelling heavenward; the same temptations, sins, and dangers are upon our path; and the same supernal interference, unseen but not unfelt, must guide us through them.

Meantime, there are but few parts of the historic books that are purely narrative. Through

out them are distributed single verses, passages, or even whole chapters, of a spiritual, devotional, or didactic character. And well indeed will these repay us for the search ; till we are so far familiar to the text, as to know immediately where to turn to them. How many moments are there when the holy aspirations of the Patriarchs will suit the present emotions of our bosoms—when the remonstrance of God with his people will reach our conscience, or his injunctions to them fix our wavering conduct ; separating them entirely from the history in which they occur. Without attempting to point out the single verses and smaller passages of this kind, which beautify the narratives throughout, I must mention as examples the divine Song of Moses after the passage of the Red Sea ; innumerable parts of the pious exhortation to the Israelites, with the summary of God's mercies and his laws contained in the first twelve chapters of Deuteronomy ; and again his song and departing blessing at the close of the same book. These are of no private concernment. They have as much to do with the children of God now, as they had then ; and if we indeed be his children, may with advantage be studied as if spoken to ourselves ; since they must now, as then, be accepted and

obeyed. But not less valuable than the words of Moses, are the words of Samuel, and the words of David or of Hezekiah or of Daniel, or the words of God addressed to them by himself, or by his messengers, the prophets.

Let us search out these passages from the mass of the historic Scriptures, and make ourselves familiar with the places in which they are to be found, that we may turn to them, when we think they will suit our occasions. If our memory is not sufficient for the purpose, it might not be unserviceable to have some sort of memoranda of our own making to assist us. I am not prepared to say how this should be done ; but I have often felt the want of one, from insufficient memory as to books and chapters, occasioning at least a loss of time, in referring to suitable portions, even when knowing what portions would suit if I could find them.

When we have selected a passage, we must endeavour to read it for ourselves—as our own concern. It is no more Joseph or Moses who speaks or is spoken to. It is God's address to us, or ours to him. It is truth, not of somebody who lived five thousand years ago, but of ourselves at the present moment. It is not something to be believed, admired, and let pass ; but something to be received into the heart, to live

upon and act upon ; to make us wiser, holier, and happier—one of these or all. For this purpose, the original speakers and actors need not be even remembered. We are alone in our closets with God. We are in devotion before him. This is a portion of his word. What have we individually to do with it? What does it say to us? In what manner does it reach our case? What use can we make of it, or what good derive from it? As the verses succeed each other, if they be prayer, let us pray with them for ourselves—if they be confession, let us open our bosoms as we read them, to the scrutiny of Him who is present; if they be precepts, let us pause, and with retrospective care, examine our own conduct by them; if they be counsels, let us treasure them in memory, with holy resolution to be led by them hereafter; and so on with whatever may occur. It is likely that verses of all these and various other characters will occur successively. Let us pause upon each, that we may rightly divide them to their uses; and still with the heart ascending in perpetual aspiration to heaven to make them effectual to those uses; for we can do nothing without assistance thence—neither desire, nor confess, nor repent, nor resolve, nor become wiser, or holier, or happier.

SECTION SEVENTH.

THE READING OF THE PSALMS.

A VERY little experience is sufficient to have taught us how much the human heart delights in the responses of a sympathizing spirit—unconsciously responding to our feelings, in the natural expression of its own. This constitutes the charm of poetry, the witchery of romance, the dissipating influence of the novel. The poetic mind revels in the luxuries of the verse, because there it finds its own impassioned feelings, its deep reflectiveness, the soarings of the imagination, and the breathings of its acute sensibilities. For the same reason the frivolous and dissipated delight in the novel of the day. These are their own thoughts, their own emotions, what they are or what they would be—follies they claim kin to, while thinking only to laugh at them. The warrior will read of war—the loving will read of love—the fashionable will read of fashion—and whence is the charm, but because the expressions of the book sympathize with the feelings of the bosom, and the writer says what the conscious reader feels?

Doubtless it is the same sympathy, the same responsive utterance of the bosom's secrecy, which makes the Book of Psalms so inestimable a treasure to the believer, so constant a favourite to the Scripture reader. Not, I apprehend, to the careless, unawakened reader. These holy books have little to do with those external things in which the just and the unjust are alike partakers: they are no recital of exciting facts; tales that please as fiction the heart that never has felt for them as truth, though professing, perhaps, to believe them. From habit, because they are a part of the daily church-service, or because so taught from childhood, or other such reason, the Psalms are more early familiar to us, and more mechanically chosen for our quotidian of reading, than any other part of Scripture. But we would appeal to the thoughtless mind, if for a moment it could be induced to think, whether they are not of all parts the most useless, the most incomprehensible. The poetic beauties of the style may indeed be tasted, if we have not read ourselves into insensibility of them: but that is all. The deadening effect of habit is strikingly evinced by the insensibility, the absolute unconsciousness with which people read from day to day, as a religious duty,

Psalms every syllable of which is a falsehood upon their lips, or a condemnation in their ear—an imprecation, not seldom, on their own heads. Such persons I am not addressing while I explain the use of the holy book. It is impossible to say what part of his word it may please God to use for the awakening of the insensible; it may be these, as well as any other; therefore are they not to be prohibited to any, nor can we say the reading of them is useless. But this is certain—there is not a sentence in them that befits the lips of the unregenerate, or can be uttered by them with honesty of heart. If they see in them anything, it must be the fearful contrast between what they read and what they feel, what they pronounce and what they mean. There is something extremely awful in the daily systematic reading of them under such circumstances. Nothing but the most appalling insensibility, the stupefaction as it were of death, could render it possible: for it is here no longer the “He said” of other men, which we may or may not agree with; neither is it the address of other men to us, which may or may not concern us. These holy aspirations purport to be the expression of the heart that reads them—prayers, desires, confessions, sorrows, joys, acknowledgments—

falsehoods, every one of them, from the lips of those who do not love the Lord and serve him. It is very fearful. We know not what to say. It would be wrong to recommend a discontinuance of the reading; and it is in vain, I fear, to urge a careful comparison during the course of it, of the sentiments of our hearts with the expressions put into our mouths. We must leave, therefore, with this brief allusion, those who make a duty of reading every morning the Psalms appointed for the day, yet never feel—never stop to consider whether they feel or not, a single sentiment those Psalms express. Well has the Scripture said of itself, that it is a savour of life unto life, or of death unto death.

In other parts of Holy Writ, we have the actions of men, their sayings, and the motives that instigate these words and actions. In the Psalms we have more. We have the secret breathings of the heart within itself—the silent communications of the spirit with God, and his with it—the perpetual soliloquy, as it were, of the soul, holding close communion with itself through every circumstance of its passage through time into eternity; clothed at once in all the simplicity of truth, and all the exaltation of poetry. It is no wonder if to the troubled mind in particular, this is a fa-

yourite part of the Bible—the most frequently recurred to, and seemingly the most effectual to the spirit's consolation. I believe it becomes increasingly so, as the believer advances in experience and knowledge of himself. I have observed already, that to the unregenerate heart, its application is impossible; if read at all, it is so from habit, and a superstitious reverence for established forms. To the young in religion, doubtless it begins to unfold its treasure-house of beauty, and should begin to be studied; carefully studied—not read as a daily service. If this last has been the practice, and has been hitherto performed without any consciousness of benefit, or any sensible impression made upon the mind by the repetition of a familiar language, I do not hesitate to advise a discontinuance of the practice, and the substitution of a totally different method of perusal; for the same reasons that I have given respecting the Scripture in general. The division of the Psalms into daily portions was for the public devotion of the church. The adoption of it in our private devotion, promises little but to render them a formula and a constraint. It is like a measured quantity of food, each day alike and of a pre-determined kind, to an ever-varying and inconstant appetite—the appetite,

not of health, but of sickness—changeful and capricious sickness.

If, as I suspect, the Psalms are to the young and inexperienced Christian a dull and uninteresting part of Scripture, because there is no chord within that responds to these deeply stricken tones of feeling, it would be advisable, for the present, to make use of them as a test ; not for finding, as by-and-bye we shall do, the resemblances between the holy Psalmist's feelings and our own, for as yet there is none ; but for detecting the differences ; word by word, and sentence by sentence, to observe what he expresses that we have never felt ; what sentiments that are in total opposition to our own ; what blessing speaks of that we have never estimated ; what malediction utters, that, verified, would seem to fall upon ourselves. This is a reasonable use to make of these writings. They contain the finished portrait of the believer, as he appears before God—not of one but of every one—of Jesus first, and of every one after him, who follows in his footsteps. Doubtless they were so intended of God. And they become thus a picture from which to copy, an exemplar by which to try ourselves, to prove whether we are and what we want of being, what it is necessary that before God we be-

come. To illustrate what I mean I will make use of the first Psalm, because it is the first, and because it is short, though others may contain more.

“Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor standeth in the way of sinners, nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful.” But stay ; ere I proceed with my reading, is this first assertion true ? Of course it is, if David was inspired to write it, and these are the words of God. But of what use is it to me that they be true, and that I read them daily, unless I believe them ? Do I think so ? The way to know this is to examine what passes habitually in my heart respecting the beings who surround me. Doubtless there are some whom I esteem blessed above others, and would stand, might I choose, in their position, and divide portions with them, in some respects, at least, of their condition. And there are others passing to and fro before me, objects of contempt, or at least of pity ; the unenvied, and to my view unblessed. Since yesterday, I must have been conscious of some such reflections on the condition of others, and probably of having acted upon it. I must have taken steps if but in the imagination of my heart, or the expressed desires of my lips, after those objects of my prefer-

ence, to the possession of which the idea of blessedness is attached. The associate of sinners, courted, admired and beloved, but still in the ways of sin—the seat of the scorner, an exalted seat and proud full often, whence he looks with contempt and speaks with ridicule of the despised truths of God, taking counsel, or likely giving it to the learned and the great, but disregarding the simple word of truth : have I admired these, and sought to mix with them, and laid my plans to follow them, as if they were really the blessed upon earth ? Then apparently I have a mind but little in unison with the words of the Psalmist, and with the mind of God. He has opened this beautiful portion of Scripture with a blessing ; but when I repeat it after him, it is not the language of my heart : I have other preferences, and covet other things.

“But his delight is the law of the Lord ; and in his law doth he meditate day and night.” Am I then one of whom a voice that cannot err declares that they are blessed, and subjoins the succeeding promises ? That is worth a pause to think upon. Delight is the strongest term of pleasure ; and sad is the heart indeed, that lives from day to day without a consciousness of delight in something. And if there is anything in particular our hearts are set upon

to delight in it, that thing, whether we will or not, whether we forbid it or invite it, will be the subject of our meditation ; not content with our day thoughts, it will disturb our slumbers, and possess our dreams. This I have felt to be the case with other things : but has it been ever the case with me respecting the things of God, all of which may be comprised in what is termed his law ? Is the subject so near my heart, that it comes into it the first in the morning ? So dear, that it will not go from it till the last at night ; and if aroused at midnight will come back again ? And this not as a loathed spectre haunts the conscience to distract it—but because the presence and the thought of God are my consolation and my joy ?

Then I am blessed—" And he shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water, that bringeth forth his fruit in his season ; his leaf shall not wither, and whatsoever he doeth shall prosper." These words are for me. It may seem, if I regard my outward circumstances, that they are not fulfilled. But the witness of God's word is better than the evidence of circumstance. The season of the fruit may not be come, and the leaf may not yet be put forth. But mistrust and anxiety do not become me. He of whom this Psalm is primarily spoken,

and for his sake transferred to all who bear his likeness, was a tree planted long before its fruit was borne. What he did for a season did not seem to prosper—rather did it appear that, planted on an ungenial soil, it withered to the root and died. Yet is he blessed for ever; because he never walked in fellowship with the ungodly, nor had other delight than in his Father's law. And it is true of me, as it was of him. If the former verses apply to me, these are a pledge to me. I am more blessed already than other beings, and yet fairer promises remain to be fulfilled. I will not faint nor be afraid.

“The ungodly are not so: but are like the chaff which the wind driveth away. Therefore the ungodly shall not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous.” Is this anything to me? I have read it in my life hundreds and hundreds of times; and it never struck me with fear, lest withered and valueless, like a thing without root, the breath of heaven should bear me away from earth, and from all the pleasant things I have enjoyed in it. And yet I have been ungodly and a sinner—Perhaps I still stand under the denunciation. It is contrasted with the former description—If I am not one, I am the

other. If I am in doubt, my heart should go up to heaven in prayer ; if assured, in grateful adoration.

“For the Lord knoweth the way of the righteous: but the way of the ungodly shall perish.” Is this good news to me, or bad? One it must be. It is the summing up of all ; shall I close the book weeping or rejoicing in issue. Perhaps I would rather God did not know my ways. I would rather him look aside, and let me follow my own liking for awhile ; and would conceal from him for ever, if it might be, the secrets of my heart. Then it is no glad news to me that he knoweth my ways, and watches my footsteps and directs every movement of my heart to the furtherance of his own will. His presence is fearful to me, his interference is importunate ; I submit to it of necessity, but it is no joy to be reminded of it. But if the first part of the verse is not for me, the other must be. There are but two ways—the righteous man’s, which is God’s, and the sinner’s, which is his own. The first is under eternal guidance, and will lead to eternity ; the last is the device of mortals, and ends with his mortality.

It is thus that in pausing on the meaning of the sacred words, one eye as it were on them,

the other on our own consciousness, what does not suit us will convict us ; what finds no sympathy in our bosoms will bring us to question why there is none. Falsehoods on our lips, though purest truth from him that wrote them, will startle the slumbering conscience as we read, and perhaps force an appeal to heaven for aid : and thus the bosom which as yet cannot taste the beauty, or partake the deep interest of these breathings of a fervent heart, because as yet there is no response of sympathizing feeling, may be benefited, essentially benefited, by the perusal ; if honestly intent on being so, and pursuing the search in such temper of mind as has been before suggested.

This slight example is given, not as a comment on the Psalm, or a prescription of the train of thought to be pursued, but as an illustration of what I mean ; to mark the object likely to result from such manner of reading, and to prove how utterly incompatible it is with the reading by measure and mechanism we may have been accustomed to. What flights of thought, what pauses of feeling, what scrutiny of ourselves and ardent appeals to heaven, might have arisen out of the brief suggestions we have made ; enough to occupy with the matter of these six verses, or perhaps

with not half their number, the longest period allotted to the devotional exercise. And yet is this psalm more limited in meaning than almost any other ; the ideas being confined to two—the blessedness of the righteous and the brevity of the course of ungodliness. We have but to cast our eye to the succeeding ones, to see what subjects of reflection, of feeling, self-examination and devotion, are developed in the space of a few verses, sometimes comprised in a single one.

Speaking for those to whom the experimental in religion is least available, because of their yet small experience in it, and consequently the Psalms an unattractive part of Scripture, I would urge the attempt thus to meditate, and apply, and appropriate them to ourselves ; and I have little doubt a new and growing interest will be perceived and ultimately enjoyed, by many who have hitherto avoided, or read them only from a feeling of propriety in doing so. To those more advanced it is unnecessary to commend a frequent perusal of the Psalms. They are the treasure-house of Christian sympathy. There is not a feeling of sorrow or of joy, of sin and helplessness, of holiness and triumph, of gentle promise, or of awful warning, which the sacred poet has left unuttered or

untouched : and I can scarcely hesitate to add, there is not a passage in them that will not at some period of our existence come home to our bosom as the response of its secret utterance, at once the voice and the reply of its present emotions. It is therefore that the sorrowful and deep-feeling spend more hours perhaps over the Psalms than any other portion of Scripture. If we consider them but as the language of a believer speaking forth his experience under the immediate inspiration of the Spirit of God—if they were the sorrows and the joys, and the prayers of David, and in him of every other believer whose heart responds to them, they were a sufficient treasure. But if we may consider them, as I believe we may, as the words of him of whom David was the type—if the tears were the Saviour's tears, the vows the Saviour's vows, and the deep-wrought expression of human feelings and desires the prophetic language of the Saviour's humanity, their value to the pious mind is increased above all price. This does not, as some have thought, rob us of the personal application of the Psalms : rather it makes them doubly ours. What we are he was—what he is we are to be. Our present portion is to follow him, our future recompense to be like him. Whatever promise was made

to Jesus, whatever sins were acknowledged by him, whatever sentiment was expressed by him, his people are to be partakers of: and it is fit his language should become their language. Sin he had not, it is true—but he had it to bear, to mourn, and to conquer: and therefore even in this, the expressions that become his people, became him who was made like them; and the language which discloses the feelings of his humanity is the appropriate language of every devout believer who follows in his footsteps. I must reserve the subject for another section.

SECTION EIGHTH.

THE READING OF THE PSALMS CONTINUED.

I CLOSED my last observations with an intimation that the Psalms may be considered as the language of the Saviour in his humanity ; under the influence, as he certainly was, of human passion and affection ; and though not in the commission, certainly under the severest imputation of sin. My readers are aware, no doubt, that this is an interpretation of the Psalms only partially admitted. I suggest it, therefore, without asserting it, meaning to avoid all critical discussion. Nor does it materially affect the subject I am treating. The reader who can so consider them, is, I believe, in no danger from the mistake, if it should be one ; but rather may be benefited in his use of the Psalms, by the influence of such a belief on the heart. Jesus is the object of our imitation, our only perfect and sufficient example : in the character of his manhood, of course—for as God we cannot imitate him, however we may hereafter see him as he is, and be made like to his glori-

fied humanity. In the Gospel narrative we have the life and conversation of that holy Being, the lustre of divinity put off, and the weeds of humanity about him. The mind that would be pure as he is pure, holy as he is holy, looks with delight upon his actions, catches with delight at his words, and endeavours by them to form his conduct and conversation in the common paths of life. But gladly would we have more. Fain would we know what passed in the Saviour's bosom when he retired from the crowd to some lowly dwelling, to think over the incidents of the day—of the insults heaped upon his sacred head—the obduracy of his enemies, and the retribution prepared for them—the future destiny of those who engrossed his heart's affections, and were to share his sorrows—and withal, of that task which was upon him, that cup so bitter which could not pass away, unless he drank it. Neither desire we this in idle curiosity. We need it for the perfecting of our divine model: for it is in the thoughts of our hearts and the secret dispositions of our minds under like circumstances, trials, fears, and provocations, that we are to be conformed to his image, as well as comforted by his sympathy. How delightful then, if we can find in these holy effusions the secrecy of the heart we

desire to penetrate. Thus Jesus felt, thus Jesus thought—thus in the privacy of his bosom, and in secret with his Father, he poured out his sorrows and his high resolves. I would not urge on any one this interpretation as necessary ; but I name it as delightful ; for if the sympathy of a human being be so precious to us, how much more the sympathy of him who is our Saviour and our God ! And if we be even mistaken in this acceptance of them, and go beyond their meaning in thus keeping the Saviour before us as the speaker when we use the Scriptures for devotional reading, I see not what but good can result from the delusion.

Let that pass, however ; let them be the words of David ; they are still not his natural, but his inspired words, written by the express design of God for our learning and example ; and their sympathy may be our consolation, and their holiness our ensample still ; next to the character of Christ, the example of his approved saints is set forth for our imitation, and their experience for our encouragement. Briefly, then, we will look over the Psalms with a view to thus making use of them. I am afraid our compass will allow us to notice but a few of many ; and perhaps may pass over what may best deserve notice : but I am rather open-

ing a purpose than fulfilling it, suggesting a plan, rather than pursuing one. I am far from intending to make a commentary, after advising the reader not to use any : and whatever remarks I may make on particular passages, are not meant for comments on their meaning, but as hints for the uses that may be made of them.

Observe the third and fourth Psalms. How many are the times we know, when external evils compass us about, and every day adds something to their pressure ; and another comes on what was too much before ; while our wasted spirits, perhaps, seem daily less sufficient for the contest ; and so far from deriving help from man, mockery and reproach, sneers and insinuations, add poignancy to every shaft of sorrow. In the language of these beautiful Psalms, so suitable to a sickening, sinking spirit, we are bidden to remember the comfort we have in other times received from God under like trials ; and to derive confidence from the remembrance, till, in the contemplation of it, surrounded by dangers, we can lie down in peace. We have the prayer, and the reply to it ; the joy that in spite of sorrow the promises of divine help can afford ; and finally the sweet conclusion to which the trusting

spirit comes—"I will lie down in peace and sleep, for thou, Lord, only makest me to dwell in safety." There are other Psalms to the same purpose, even more strongly expressed—witness the 71st and 77th.

The pressure of external ill and the world's malice are not the only, nay, nor the severest trial of the Christian. For one complaint of others he breathes many of himself; and while the fierceness of man's wrath but rouses his courage, the sense of God's displeasure sinks him to the dust. Observe the 6th Psalm. The soul cannot be long experienced in religion without realizing this sickening of the spirit, this anxious waiting for return, this soul-consuming misery under the consciousness of sin, and the absence of all sensible comfort from above, while it anxiously asks, How long? Is it no comfort under such painful feelings to find them traced by other hands? To learn that no new evil has befallen us? Here is the contrition, the self-reproach of one who was the chosen servant of God—perhaps of him who bore the chastening he had not merited, to appease the wrath we fear. How like his thought to ours! These also have sunk thus low—these too have seemed abandoned. Yet their cry closes with a word of confidence—even of

triumph—And will not ours? Is not their God our God, as our corruption their corruption? While the bosom responds to the deep-wrought expression of suffering, it learns to participate in the confidence and triumph that succeed it. And thus the heart cheers itself in contemplation of others' woes; and while in others' language it pours out its feeling before God, seems at length to accept the mourner's confidence, as a pledge of heaven's mercy to itself. Of similar character are the 13th, 22d, and 38th Psalms, and many others.

Much difficulty, and often I believe considerable harassment, has arisen to the mind of the pious reader, from those Psalms that make appeal to the justice of God, and plead innocence and uprightness as claims to defence against our enemies. Ill such language seems to become the lips of a sinner, to whom neither God nor man can render more evil than he is conscious of deserving. Neither dares the humble, self-convicted lip, urge before God the plea of merit or the proud challenge of examination, after the manner of the 7th Psalm. This difficulty is removed by the application of the words to the Saviour. He had an innocence to plead, and compensation to claim for undeserved wrong. To no human being besides, as view-

ed in himself, can appeals like these belong, or the similar ones of the 12th, 26th, &c. There seems little doubt, therefore, that they are the appeals of the sinless Jesus to his Father's truth and justice, to look and behold no iniquity in him, and reward him according to his integrity. But I cannot think the Psalm that so speaks becomes on that account inapplicable to ourselves, and loses all meaning on our lips. No—as united to him, whatever belongs to Jesus, belongs to his people—whatever he pleaded for himself, he has left in plea for them. Sinners as we are, the terms upright, righteous, holy, are perpetually applied to us by God. Why? Because there is a light in which he so considers us; even the light of redemption, which is by the righteousness of Christ. Since he is upright and perfect in righteousness, and has in all integrity fulfilled the law, those who are the purchase of his blood, have their sin so blotted out as to be no more had in remembrance before God, and for his sake are accounted righteous before Him. There is a sense also, I am persuaded, and a time, in which the believer can use for himself these pleas before his Maker, and find confidence and comfort in them; and that without the least self-ignorance or pride of heart. Why else does the apostle speak of a

conscience void of offence before God—of walking in purity of heart before him? There are expressions used representing the saints in the Epistles, full as strong as these of the Psalmist, in which so much difficulty appears: yet these stand not in opposition to the consciousness of sin, deepening ever as the heart advances towards holiness. They are uttered from a heart confident of its own integrity in the faith, of its love of holiness and truth. We attempted, in a former Section, to describe that pure and honest heart with which we should come before God to the reading of his word. And if we can bring it we are free to plead it with him. Humbled, contrite and self-abased as the Christian is in his own eyes when he lives above the world, walks in near communion with God, and endeavours in conduct and disposition to grow into his likeness, there is a testimony of a good conscience, a sense of integrity of purpose and honesty of heart, which, as he received it of God, he knows that God will look upon with approbation; and against the false representations of man, and the accusations of the evil one, and the stings of remaining sin within him, he pleads, humbly yet confidently pleads, “Judge me, O Lord, according to mine integrity,”—the integrity with which he is determined to serve

him in the ways of righteousness and peace. Vain were the promises of God to the upright, if none could own and none could plead them. But, in fact, there is a joyful confidence, a holy exultation, the very opposite to presumption, for it is the growth of humility in the consciousness of a believer before God, which those have little idea of whose bosoms are distracted with a divided choice, their integrity every moment put to question by some unholy compromise. If therefore these sentences die upon our lips, as too venturous a challenge of omniscient justice, let us pause and fix them upon the memory as something in the mystery of godliness which we have yet to learn. Let us bow our heads over them with shame that we cannot utter them; and beseech that Saviour to whom they primarily belong, to plead them for us at the Father's throne, and communicate to us of his own uprightness.

Know we anything of the language of the 23d Psalm? It has occurred in our reading often—it has been commended to our taste by its poetic beauties—but have our hearts ever really responded to its language? If they have, we need not to be told that such moments are the happiest of our existence; and that in the enjoyment of them, the bosom full of holy con-

fidence and peace, can find no greater pleasure than in the perusal of words responding to these feelings, and meet to give utterance to them before God. If they have not—if terrors of death, and consciousness of sin, and anxious apprehensiveness of this world's ill, form in our bosoms a mournful contrast to this song of confidence—do not read it, admire it and pass on—mark how happy you might be and are not—how secure you should be and are not—see what unmeet language is ever on your lips, of discontent and fearfulness, contrasted with the language of one whose Shepherd is the Lord. Well may these heavenly effusions teach us what we ought to be, when they fail to reflect our feelings as we are.

It has occurred to many, I believe, to be embarrassed with those passages, such as occur in the 7th, 71st, and 118th Psalms, which speak of enemies and oppressors, and ask defence from the injury intended. And especially to the young and happy, who are conscious of no injury and know no enemies; or, if they do, have learned otherwise than to speak of them with imprecation. But this embarrassment is removed if we consider, as we surely may, that these enemies so bitterly spoken of are spiritual enemies—the evil spirit that watches to destroy

—the temptations that everywhere surround us—our infirmities, our sins, ourselves—for greater enemies have we none, than that self we idolize. The youngest, alas! and the most unconscious, are not the least exposed to these insidious enemies; and if they have not found them, and have not felt the arrows in their bosoms, and the snares about their feet, it is because they know not friends from foes, and accept as good the evil that destroys them. But view these passages aright, and many enough are the times when it will suit our condition to take the cries of the Psalmist unto our lips, that our enemies may be confounded and put to confusion, and our feet be rescued from their snares. Generally, most generally when we hold this language, we shall be praying against some detected evil in ourselves—some habit or disposition, perhaps, by which we have been recently led into sin, and exposed to consequent sorrow—or it may be some external circumstance of our condition, that proves a temptation to us, and leads us in opposition to our better wishes.

In the Psalms, however, there are passages innumerable, as in the fifty-second Psalm, in which destruction is invoked on the wicked, and their sufferings predicted in accents of triumph.

This is foreign to our feelings, trembling at the punishment we have so narrowly escaped, and looking with anxious pity on those who are reserved to the misery we are in mercy spared. To explain this discrepancy it has been suggested that the passages are rather prophetic than imperative, intimating what shall be to the wicked, rather than imploring it. But this does not explain the tone of satisfaction and triumph with which vengeance is denounced. Again, the application of David's language to the Saviour has been used to remove the difficulty. He, divine and innocent, had a right to invoke vengeance on his oppressors, and triumph in the future punishment of those who now triumph over his despised humanity. But such was not the language of the man Jesus when he spake of his personal enemies on earth—not the swelling of his bosom when he wept over the impenitent city that condemned him. It is no personal resentment that he utters—no wanton and unnecessary vengeance he invokes—as if he, or his people who follow him, could have pleasure in the death of him that dieth. Still there is a sense in which the servants of God may and do desire the destruction of the wicked, and must eventually rejoice in it. As the enemies of all we love and long

for, of God and man, of holiness and peace, the disturbers of his government, the preventers, till their cup of wrath be full, of the Saviour's reign, and consequently of the consummation of our hopes, their utter and final extermination from the earth is our most legitimate and necessary desire, and has been always enjoined as a part of our petitions to the Almighty. And doubtless these petitions, repeated here so often and with so much seeming bitterness, are against the wicked, not as our enemies, but as the enemies of God; uttered in the spirit of holiness and justice, not of resentment and re- crimination. If we examine the expressions, we shall always find them coupled with the sufferings occasioned to the innocent, or the insults offered to God. While we discourage any feeling of averseness towards these passages as if we would be wiser and more humane than he who wrote them, it may be desirable, when we make use of them as our own, to be careful of the character of our feelings towards the wicked, and the object we have in invoking vengeance, that they be simply in unison with the declared purpose and holy will of God, unmixed with any selfish and malignant feeling. This caution observed, there is little reason, however much of seeming sensibility

there may be, in shrinking from the use of such passages. The destruction of our country's foes is considered matter of congratulation—we consider it no wrong to pray for the defeat of the enemy and the oppressor of our house. Is it the enemy of God alone against whom we may desire and invoke no vengeance?

Few things, I believe, habitually give more disturbance to our minds than the success and prosperity of the ungodly. Its natural tendency is to shake our confidence in the sovereignty of God, and discontent us with our choice of Him, while all his gifts and favours seem to be to his enemies. And even in better feelings, there is a holy indignation in the bosom against the successes of iniquity, that if a less culpable, is by no means a less painful emotion; and, in comparing our lot with others, sickening discouragement will come into the heart in spite of every effort to forbid it. Many of the Psalms speak beautifully to these feelings: when we are under the influence of them, we cannot find better medicine than in the 37th, the 49th, and many others. The exquisitely drawn comparison between the prosperity of the wicked and the righteous man's adversity, their contrasted destiny and its hastening termination, are lessons meet for either; but fraught with

sweetest consolations to those that wait upon the Lord. Nor do I know where better we can turn, at those moments of hesitation, when the yet unstable mind is divided between the invitations of the world and the offers of religion, wishing to choose well for itself, but overborne by the enticements of present pleasure.

It is remarkable that to a world of sorrow, and to bosoms prone to it as the sparks fly upward, these songs are dictated full half of joy. Was this necessary? Perhaps our hearts have never told us so. At a period of life in which we have been more conversant with joy than sorrow, it may never have suggested itself to us that we want the Bible's help to express the gladness of our hearts, and find sympathy for their overflow of joy. Perhaps—I speak it with some certainty—there are days when the hour of Scripture reading overtakes us in the flush of enjoyment, the breast still heaving with unsubsidied pleasure, or panting for anticipated mirth. The Bible is in our hands, but what shall we do? We would read—but these strains of mournful import jar upon the ear, and the heart's lightness mocks the lip as it attempts to sound the deep and solemn tones. Well—Heaven has provided even for this. “Are any glad, let them sing Psalms.” Let us bring our

gladness to the Psalmist's pæons of joy, and try if we can find sympathy between them. Here is mention enough of joy. Observe the 92d Psalm, the 100th, the 103d, the 105th. Earth, air, and seas, are called upon to help the song, lest man should not sing it loud enough. The heart of the royal mourner, so lately broken with sorrow, seems now as if it would speak again with fulness of gratitude and joy. Whatever be the excitation of our spirits at the moment of entering on the devotional exercise, if it be of source legitimate, we may expend it in praises to Him who is the source, the object, and the sanctifier of our rejoicing. The ruffled mind will calm itself as it pours its feelings forth, and find in the exercise itself the composure it seems necessary to bring to it. If we cannot do this—if the Psalmist's joys are as discordant with our feelings as his sorrows—if God has so little to do with our delights, we hesitate to mix his name with them, even so much as to give him thanks—if our timbrel is sounded, and our pleasant harp is strung to drown his name, and not to sound it; and the very subjects of the Psalmist's gladness would shame our past, or cloud our coming pleasure—and as we try to read, there is more dissonance in it than even might be in his strains of

anguish—What are we to think of it? These were the Saviour's joys—the only ones his humanity ever tasted. These were the royal poet's pleasures—the only ones he has expressed. Nay, this holy book has no word of sympathy throughout for any other. Other rejoicing it has named indeed, but not in terms that will suit our present feeling. What are we to do? Must we close the book, confess there is no union between it and us, and wait a fitter season? I would advise rather, that we unclothe our bosoms by the side of it; and before God, and before our unstified conscience, examine and compare them, and find wherein they differ. The source of David's joy was the memory of God's benefits—in ours, perhaps, he was forgotten. The subject of David's gladness was his deliverance from sin—ours, perhaps, was the indulgence of it. David's harp played for victory, where we have fought among the vanquished. I cannot trace the comparison through—at the best, perhaps, while in all the Psalmist's pleasures God was a party and his name was praised, in ours he was neglected and unthanked. The want of harmony is no wonder, but also is it no light matter. Trace it to the source. As you read, consider, and in considering, pray. In doing so the mind may become serious; it

may even become sad ; but the passing sadness will tend to heighten and to purify its future joys, by bringing them into assimilation with the joys of heaven, foretasted upon earth.

And still I seem not to have compassed half my subject. I have not alluded to the contemplation of creative power, as exhibited in the 104th Psalm, so suited to our seasons of tranquil enjoyment : to the picture of God's dealings with the Israelites, as contained in the 106th and 107th, so exact a recital of his workings in the heart, and our own perverse returns : nor to those more decidedly prophetic, which will indeed be included in our future mention of the Prophetic Scriptures. I can only leave what I have said as unfinished, and almost disconnected suggestions. If the limits of my plan admitted, I might ascribe to every Psalm its peculiar purposes, and the frame of mind to which it seems most suitable ; and to every frame have commended some passages in particular. But this exceeds my present design. I only drop the suggestion, and pass on. Let every one for themselves make the choice that seems best for the heart at the moment of devotion ; and for themselves discover and apply what the chosen portion may contain. Be they assured they have an interest in all. If there is anything

that owns no sympathy with them, nor they with it, let them mark it as something yet to be attained—if there is anything that revolts and offends them, let them mark it as something on which they and God are not agreed.

SECTION NINTH.

THE READING OF THE PROPHEPIC SCRIPTURES.

A VERY large proportion of the volume of Scripture is decidedly prophetic. We cannot peruse any of the pages of this holy book, without perceiving it is the writing of one to whom the past and the present are the same, to-day as yesterday, and to-morrow as to-day. Whatever be the immediate subject of the narrative, the principal group, as it might be, of the drawing, all eternity is in the back-ground—the eternal past, and the eternal future—and our attention is perpetually called to objects that more or less distinctly occupy the distance. To us more or less distinctly; not to him who drew them. We are in the habit of speaking of things future, as uncertain and contingent, depending upon something as uncertain as themselves. But this is language of our weakness, itself the origin of all uncertainty. In reality there is none. To the eye of Omniscience on one side lies the past, with all its connexion of events, the motives that led to them, and the conse-

quences that resulted from them ; as in a map the towns and cities, with the roads and cross-roads that connect them—and on the other side lies the future, consequences still connected with events, and events resulting from intentions, yet all as well defined and certain, and like the map as well, as that which is already lapsed and gone. This appears in every part of the Holy Scripture, and distinguishes it from all other writings. When the inspired historian tells his story of the days gone by, the wars and legislations of other ages, he passes from them in a moment to those that are to come, and thence to them back again, as if all were but one picture to his eye. When the inspired moralist presents his picture of humanity in its existent state, he gives with it the issue of all that he portrays, its first origin and ultimate result. And what a stamp of divinity is there thence upon it ! It is only the stupidity of habit that prevents our perceiving the attributes of Deity, as it were, present with us while we read, and being deeply conscious it is God, not man, that speaks to us in these hallowed pages.

In treating of the Prophetic Scriptures, therefore, I am not alluding exclusively, or in particular, to those books we call the Prophets. In them much that was once prophetic, is now his-

torical ; and that which was warning or promise to those to whom it was addressed, stands now as a narrative preserved for our example. Such were the prophecies of Daniel that immediately concerned Nebuchadnezzar—the promises of Jeremiah for the first restoration of Jerusalem, and the chastisement of her enemies—and all those messages of heaven, delivered by the prophets or men of God as they were called, when they left the desert in which they dwelt, to make known in the camp or at the court the will of the Almighty. Of such Scriptures as these I have already spoken, as included in the narrative parts of the Bible. Beautiful assurances are they, that what is still prophetic is no more uncertain than that which at the time it was spoken seemed no less so—now explained and verified, and made, in our language, sure—in fact, no surer than it was at first.

Exclusively of the prophets, so by distinction called, every part of the Bible contains prophetic Scripture. The Apocalypse almost wholly—the Psalms to a very great extent—the Books of Moses by detached passages in almost every part—the Gospels and Epistles occasionally and briefly. To all such portions of Scripture, bearing reference to the world's futurity, the observations I make on the subject will apply.

If my previous remarks are just, it will immediately appear how wrong is the notion assumed by some, that the prophetic parts of the Bible are in themselves vague, figurative, uncertain, and obscure; calculated not to enlighten, but mislead—meaning of course something, but of nothing intelligible—consequently rather dangerous than desirable for our perusal. The world has seen, nevertheless, a great portion of the prophecies fulfilled; and these have proved neither vague, nor figurative, nor obscure; but so clear, on the contrary, and so literal, we consider the Jew without excuse, who could not recognize in Jesus his foretold Messiah, and in the armies that encompassed Jerusalem the predicted avengers of iniquity. And observe, whatever difference is between the past and future prophecy, is in us, and not in it. Where, otherwise, shall we fix the moment at which that which was literal became figurative, vague, and indefinite? Have we never sailed upon the waters, and looking behind us, seen the waves bright and glittering in the sunshine; and before us, and seen them veiled in the deep grey of evening? Did we think the sunshine terminated exactly where we stood? It seemed so; but when we had gone farther it seemed

so still; and still the same as we proceeded onward.

Such is our position in the course of divine revelation. As it passes, it becomes clear and simple to the plainest understanding—that which is to come is only obscure, because our vision receives not the light that is upon it. And by the manner of its past fulfilment we may best judge of the manner of fulfilment to be expected for what remains. Has it ever occurred to us to suppose the Jew was misemployed who studied the prophecy of his country's doom, and read from day to day the mysterious prognostics of his expected king—that such study would mislead him, and be to him rather dangerous than desirable? The falseness of such a supposition is instantly apparent. And yet there is no difference in the case. The Jew of ancient days could have no more to do with what has since elapsed, than we with what is still future; nor had he any brighter lamp to study it by. He stood in the same position, with respect to the first coming of the Messiah, as we with respect to his returning; and might with exactly the same plea have put his book aside, and treated the prophetic pages as vague, figurative, and unimportant. It is probable that the greater number did so; and

having forgotten or remained ignorant of their contents, failed to recognize in Jesus when he came the characters of their predicted king. Some few we know did otherwise ; and by the study of prophetic Scripture, prepared themselves to know and welcome Messiah when he appeared.

But while I repel the idea that there is any part of the Bible which is not written for our learning, which is no concern of ours, and may with impunity be put aside, I am not going to recommend what is commonly called the study of prophecy as a part of our devotional reading. There are other times : at these I recommend no study but of our personal interest in the text before us, and of that text as affecting our personal religion. It is well for us at other times, to hear what those have to say, and read what those have written, who have given themselves to this study—to compare their words with the words of Scripture, and, however new and startling they may seem, with humbleness and teachableness of spirit to ask of heaven to be enlightened on a subject in which we are so deeply interested. Though if any will present to us the darkness of their interpretation as a safer light to walk by than the clear day of revelation already manifest and verified, and

entertain us with erudite constructions and prophetic lore, in preference to the plain words of faith and holiness, I believe we had better not take them for our guides. And if deep research, and critical conjecture, and curious inquiry upon these matters will intrude itself upon our seasons of devotion, I believe we had better bid them away, and find a fitter season to give them entertainment.

By these suggestions I do not exclude the prophetic parts of the Bible from our daily exercise. That were to close up a treasure inestimable and exhaustless; as applicable to ourselves, and our personal interests, necessities and feelings, as any part of the Scriptures whatever. In applying the words of these books to the spiritual Israel, the spiritual Jerusalem, their first application to God's chosen people, the Jews, has by some been lost sight of; and to recover it, they have by others been so forcibly taken back again, as to deprive the child of God, by the redemption of Jesus' blood, of his richest store of truth and consolation. But neither was necessary. The separation of Abraham and his seed from the generations of men to serve the one true God, to live under his immediate guidance, while to all beside he was unknown, and to be called his peculiar people, chosen and

beloved, while to all beside he was a vengeful enemy—this peculiar and extraordinary separation was but an emblem from first to last of the people since purchased by the Redeemer's blood, reclaimed from sin, and separated from a world lying in wickedness, to be the adopted children of God, to be governed by his laws, led by his Spirit, and protected by his power. The analogy has in all things been preserved. However literally every promise or warning may apply to the temporal affairs of the Jewish people, and however far they will be in the future, as they have been in the past, literally fulfilled to them, they are thence the more, not the less certainly applicable, in a spiritual sense, to the Church of God in Christ, and personally to every individual child of God who is a member of it. Whatever is true of the former, is true of the latter—whatever is addressed to the former, is addressed to the latter also—whatever is theirs is ours, of blessing or of promise.

To illustrate my meaning, I will make use of the 35th chapter of Isaiah. It has been for many ages the song with which the afflicted has beguiled the hours of his affliction, the weary pilgrim's chant in all his passage through the desert world. The wilderness of the first verse, so sad and solitary, has seemed to be his

own bosom, and the world over whose promise its blighting has extended. The message of encouragement in the fourth verse has seemed addressed to him in his hours of fearfulness, trial, and oppression. The succeeding promises were a stay amid the stubborn insensibility of men and the corruption of the abandoned earth. The eighth verse seemed to describe the way of salvation, made plain to the simple in the pure Gospel light; and the concluding one, that eternity of unbroken bliss, which awaits the redeemed in the mansions of glory. But some will say this chapter has another meaning. The solitary desert is that land once flowing with milk and honey, parched now and thirsty, the habitation of the dragon, bringing forth weeds and rushes: the Lebanon, the Carmel, and the Sharon, are the places literally so named: the promises are to the scattered, helpless, and oppressed, to the yet blind and stubborn people of the house of Israel; the highway and the way shall be made hereafter for their return to Palestine, and the songs of everlasting joy be sung on the heights of Zion. I believe they say true. But this need make no difference in our devotional use of the chapter. It means but the more certainly what it meant before. If we forget this latter applica-

tion altogether, I am persuaded we do no wrong in taking to our bosoms, as the chosen of God in Christ, the consolations and promises it contains. If we remember it, I am persuaded that by restoring it to the chosen of God in Abraham, we need not be dispossessed and deprived of them. That first temporal election and separation was the emblem of the spiritual; and the events and circumstances which so miraculously pursued those who were the subject of it in their temporal affairs, have their exact analogy in the spiritual conduct of those who belong to the election and separation in Jesus Christ. We have but to trace their history through, comparing it with what we know of others and ourselves in spiritual things, to perceive the analogy entire; and by the past may be instructed of the future. If our minds have been occupied with the construction of these Scriptures, and unsatisfied respecting their just application, I do not say it is of no consequence to know—all truth is of consequence—and it were much too proud for man to say that what God has written is not necessary to be studied or inquired about. But to our devotion it is of no consequence; and to our personal application of the prophetic promises and threats it is of no consequence. If our hearts are warmed

and exalted by the interpretation we have received, it is well—let it be present with us, and be used to that purpose. But if all we feel about it is a yet unsatisfied curiosity, it will but interrupt our devotion to entertain the subject—let us reserve it for our hours of study rather, and for this time take the Bible as we have received it, and fully understand it. There is indeed enough. If I have chosen the last chapter of the Revelations for my devotional reading, and I find in the first five verses a description of that place where the just shall reign for ever—which all that is most lovely and most pleasing to our senses is made use of to embellish—where the curse that has blighted our poor world is no more to be found—of which the greatest charm of all is that the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in it—while my heart throbs with the anticipation of expected bliss, and grows careless for the trifles of this departing world, and rises in adoration of that Being whose face I am to see, and in whose desired presence I am about to dwell, I need not recall my heaven-gone thoughts, and check my anticipating joy, and withhold my strains of adoration, to determine where that blessed abode shall be. Or if, in the 10th and 11th verses, I read that the time is at hand—that

He comes quickly—and that at his coming, all must be determined to good or ill for ever, and to every man be given the portion he has chosen—while my awed spirit returns upon itself to ask if it is ready, I need not stay the examination till I have satisfied myself if it shall be in ten years, or in fifty, or in five hundred. He that testifieth of these things saith, Surely I come quickly—and if my bosom breathes the prompt Amen, it will be too full of its desires, and of the gladness of these tidings, to go to criticism and controversy upon the manner of his appearing. As much as we do know by previous study, it is good to bear in mind—it may increase our feeling by placing something more definite before us—the more we know of what God has revealed, the more we shall value and enjoy his word—let us despise not knowledge, for it is one of the objects we come to the Scripture in search of. But for our devotion we know enough, be it in faith and simplicity ever so little; and this is not the time to inquire for more, unless by an aspiration to heaven to give it when it is necessary. Now is the time to make use of what I know, and appropriate what I understand. The prophetic Scriptures are good for me in sadness, for they are full of encouragement—in doubt, for they

are full of promise—in carelessness, for they are full of warning—in contrition, for they are full of mercy—nay, they are good for me in every case, for they are full of Jesus.

SECTION TENTH.

THE READING OF THE GOSPELS.

THE first read, the first familiar part of Scripture to most of us, I suppose, is the Gospels. They form the earliest lessons of infancy, and in education are selected as the fittest for our years and understanding. Besides that they contain the ground-work of our faith, and are thence the fittest to be taught us first, they seem to be the easiest to comprehend, the soonest compassed—they are a simple narrative of facts, and collection of plain precepts—they seem to present no subject of difficulty or disputation—they seem to contain no doctrine to cavil over, or darkness to err in. They who presume to mistrust some parts of Scripture, affect to value these, and dispense them freely to their children and others, and use them freely for themselves. They do well. Would that they indeed were valued in proportion as they are thus ostensibly preferred. The Gospels thus become the first and most familiar portion of the Scripture fully known, and, as it appears,

understood, while much of the holy book remains yet unstudied and obscure.

Perhaps this early familiarity is in part the reason, that when we begin to think more deeply of religion, and search the Scripture more seriously, the Gospels offer less frequent attraction than some other parts. We think we know them. They contain indeed the ground-work and first principles of our faith, the transactions on which all is founded; but these we think we have learned. The narrative is beautiful indeed and important, of our Saviour's suffering, but it is to us an oft-told tale—we think we have mastered it thoroughly. Our excited curiosity must have something newer—our increased appetite demands something stronger—the more explicit doctrines of the Epistles, the deeper mysteries of the Prophets, the stronger feelings of the Psalmist, have become more attractive to us. We desire to enlighten our understanding and exercise our intellect, to clear our confused perceptions, to satisfy our doubts and confirm our vacillating principles. The food of our infancy, wholesome and good, seems yet too plain and simple for our years; and we leave the Gospel narrative, not entirely, but in habitual preference, for the less familiar parts of Scripture.

God has provided for these feelings, and therefore cannot be supposed to disapprove them. Had the Gospels been all that was desirable, more had not been written. Had they been all his people should study, or delight in, or require, they had assuredly been the whole of revelation. There is a stage in our Christian course when the doctrinal parts of Scripture are as needful as they are attractive to us, and when it would be unwise to blame or to restrain the preference. Our understanding does really need to be enlightened, our perceptions to be cleared, and our weak and vacillating faith to be confirmed by the study of other Scriptures.

But shall I be mistaken if I say, that when this is done, we shall end where we began, and come back whither we set out—that the Gospel narrative contains the last lesson as well as the first, the perfecting as well as the beginning of our faith? Yes, I am persuaded there is a time in our Christian progress, and that no undesirable one, in which the Gospels become again our favourite reading—the very resting place of our delight, whence we excuse with pleasure into the other Scriptures, but to return to these as best and sweetest of them all. And it is when the mind has sought out and been satisfied of the way of salvation—

when the doctrines of the Gospel are understood, and the spirit of disputation is put to silence. When the soul to its own consciousness is saved, has repented, has believed, has obeyed, and been accepted; and, with the sentence of acquittal thus sealed, and the gates of hell thus closed, and ultimate triumph made sure in the Redeemer's pledge, there remains only to desire and pursue that other part of salvation, the obedience of faith, the elevation of the soul from this base world, the sanctification of the heart under the Holy Spirit's influence, and the restoration of the image of Christ in the bosom of humanity. "Since these things are so"—it is as if the soul thus communed with itself—"Since I am redeemed from misery and sin, and assigned to bliss and holiness—since Jesus has made sure my inheritance for me, and I have no more to do but to take possession—what manner of person ought I to be? How am I to walk in simplicity before God, as becomes my nobler destiny? Which is the directest path to that possession of holiness and peace? How shall I commend myself to him who so has loved me, and conform myself to the likeness to which he has redeemed me? 'Then shall I be satisfied when I awake after his likeness.'" The ques-

tion, what shall I do to be saved? has been answered; and now the inquiry is, what shall I do who am saved? There is no answer to this, but in the example and the character of Him we are to follow and resemble. If the ultimate object of satisfaction is to be like him as he is, the way to it is to endeavour to be like him as he was, when he wore our nature and walked our sublunary path.

This subject of study, the history of Christ's humanity, is contained in the Gospels. Other Scriptures tell us why he came, whither he is gone, and the eternal issues of his work. These tell us what he did when he was here. In the preceding books, he is the promised Messiah, the prophetic King, Creator and God eternal—in the subsequent ones, he is the conqueror of death and hell, the Redeemer of his people, the Judge of all the earth. In these he is the man Christ Jesus—subject to like passions with ourselves, walking in our streets, sitting at our tables, occupied with our duties, and engaged in the ordinary intercourse of human life. The Gospels are no longer, to the mind thus tuned, the soon-compassed and soon-fathomed tale that became their childish understanding, and was exhausted and familiarized before their riper years. It is the deepest, and the

hardest lesson of the whole, and remains to be learned when all beside is compassed. It is no more the simple fare on which the hungry only feed. It is the feast to which the appetite returns, when it has taken to fulness all that is offered it elsewhere. It is that of which our immortality will be the never-ended study, the everlasting comment—the life and character of Jesus.

I do not know what assistance I can offer for the perusal of the Gospels, or how to speak of the frame of mind in which they are most desirable. They are as a beautiful picture of our best beloved, which we hang up in our chamber, that we may see it always. We choose for it the most conspicuous place, and we seat ourselves so that we may see it best. We do not want to be told when to look at it. O! we know that well enough—our eyes are reverting to it ever. In hours of occupation the hasty glance—in times of leisure the silent meditation. Every line and shadow we have examined, and yet are not satisfied with looking, and every day find some new beauty in it. No occasion comes at any time, when the sight of it is unwelcome or indifferent to us. But there is another thing we might do. We might wish to make a copy of this picture. Then

our study of it would become more arduous and intense. We should sit hour after hour before it, our attention minutely fixed upon its traits. Our casual pleasure would be changed into an anxious occupation. We should seek occasion to pursue it, and return again and again unwearied to the perfecting of our task. The frequency then of our returns would be proportioned to the difficulty of the undertaking, and our eagerness to accomplish it.

It would be impossible, I think, to define any state of mind, for which some part of the Gospels will not be suitable and appropriate reading. Amid the crosses and contumely of an unrighteous world, what so reconciling as to read how He fared in it whom we aspire to follow? Amid its flatteries and its mirth, what so required a caution, as to read that it had no flatteries and no mirth for him? In the depression of repented sin, where find better consolation than in that act in which sin was made an end of? And in its presumptuous carelessness, where a warning so tremendous as in the judgment that once fell on it? If ever we doubt of the power of God, or of the will of God to save us, where can we go to be re-assured, so well as in these treasured pages? If at any time the mysterious character of the Deity, and his greatness,

and his distance, and his nature incomprehensible, appal us and discourage our approach, here may we find him in all his characters manifest ; no longer high, no longer distant, mysterious, incomprehensible ; but brought down to the limit of our perceptions ; placed as it were within the embrace of our affections in the characters of manhood. A thousand things more I might particularize. I have already said there is a time when our own conduct and character, our life and conversation, become the subjects of deepest interest to us, and occupy a very large portion of our anxiety. There is not a day passes in which we are not distressed by our unlikeness to him we love, and our unmeetness for the state to which we are preferred. Determined to choose the way of peace and holiness, we yet cannot find it ; we turn hither and thither, try everything, follow after everybody, and yet nothing brings us right. For this I have particularly commended the study of the Gospels, as containing the life and character of Jesus Christ.

Do you say you have no power to copy what you find ? You want the divine power of his deity, the sinless perfection of his humanity. There is no analogy in the case, to suit it to your purpose. If we were to set you down before a

finished portrait, and bid you take the likeness with paper and crayons, you might say you could not—you have not materials for the work—you have neither colour nor canvass, nor anything wherewith to go about it. But could you not? Might you not so copy it, that though the exquisite colouring should not be there, the finished workmanship should not be there, and the inestimable value could not be transferred, it should still be so like that every one should say it was the same?

If I were to particularize in what the character of Jesus can be the model on which to form our own, I might say, among other things, in the tone of his conversation—in the employment of his time—in the objects for which he lived—in the temper of mind in which he pursued them—his manner of receiving the ordinary occurrences of life, and the use he made of them—his manner of feeling for and dealing with the beings around him. These are general features; they include though they may not designate the minuter touches—they are an outline sketch, but they form the likeness—and they may be copied by all those in whom the spirit of Jesus dwells.

For example. I have my time, a part of it or the whole, at my disposal—I am not in a

condition that requires manual or mental labour for life's necessities, and the claims of domestic duty are lightly answered. I am so far of the mind of Christ that I would, if I knew how, dispose of it according to my Father's will. Well then, how did he dispose of his? He spent little, if any, selfishly. It is emphatically said of him, that he went about doing good. If he went apart to pray, he came back to communicate—if he retired to the wilderness for a season, he returned to the active charities of life. He did not wait till suffering and sorrow sought him out, or keep his righteous counsel till contrition asked for it. It was his constant occupation to distribute what he had, and spend for the promotion of God's glory, and the alleviation of the condition of humanity, the boundless powers committed to him. Is it because mine are less that I cannot do so too?

Sometimes I am troubled about my general conversation, in my family, among my friends, and with strangers. I find it is very frivolous, very useless, often very mischievous. I am so much disgusted at times with the intercourse of society, I could resolve to seal my lips in silence. I know not how to mend my conversation—I am not sure that I know what it should be—Scripture speaks of having our con-

versation in heaven—but what may that mean? Then is there not this feature to be traced in my divine example? I will open the page and see. Jesus spake with his friends—Jesus spake with strangers—he sate in conversation at the tables of conviviality—he walked with his companions in the streets, observing on all around him. It may be remarked, that of all that is transmitted to us of the Saviour's words, very little indeed was delivered on grave occasions and in set discourse. Nearly the whole is uttered in what we should call common conversation, called forth by occurrences, and by surrounding objects. I may go through the whole. I may trace the motives from which he acted and his ends. When he departs from the city, he tells me why. When he goes up to the feast I am informed what he goes to do. The motives that actuate him are perpetually laid open to my scrutiny, as if on purpose to compare them with my own. If I do not find self in any, and I find God in all, need I remain at a loss to know what stroke of the copyist's pencil will here produce a likeness?

And then I may find out as well the temper and spirit in which he did what he was tasked to do. It may have been my misery that even the good I do has been done amiss, and only

evil come of it. I have copied him in the purpose, and in the act, and yet the drawing is not like. Bring it then and compare it with his wisdom, with his discretion, with his gentleness, with his long forbearance, his humility, his undeviating simplicity and truth. And then the casualties of life—its luxuries and privations—its kindnesses and wrongs—the good and the evil of its providential course. These befell him, although he was its Lord. Jesus was no deity in this, beyond the reach of human destiny to pleasure or to pain him. Perhaps his feelings were as much more acute than mine as his nature was more exalted—in nothing were they less. Then if I would learn how to meet what befalls me, and what use to make of it, and with what mind to view it, I may be amply taught by his example. And with my treatment of my fellow creatures and my general tone of feeling towards them, it is the same. There is no secrecy of Jesus' mind. His holy indignation and intolerance of sin, while he stood the friend of the sinner ever, his tender and affectionate intercourse with those he loved, while yet he gave no countenance to their wrong, nor turned aside his foot to conciliate their favour—his independent elevation above the opinions or the ways of men, while yet he

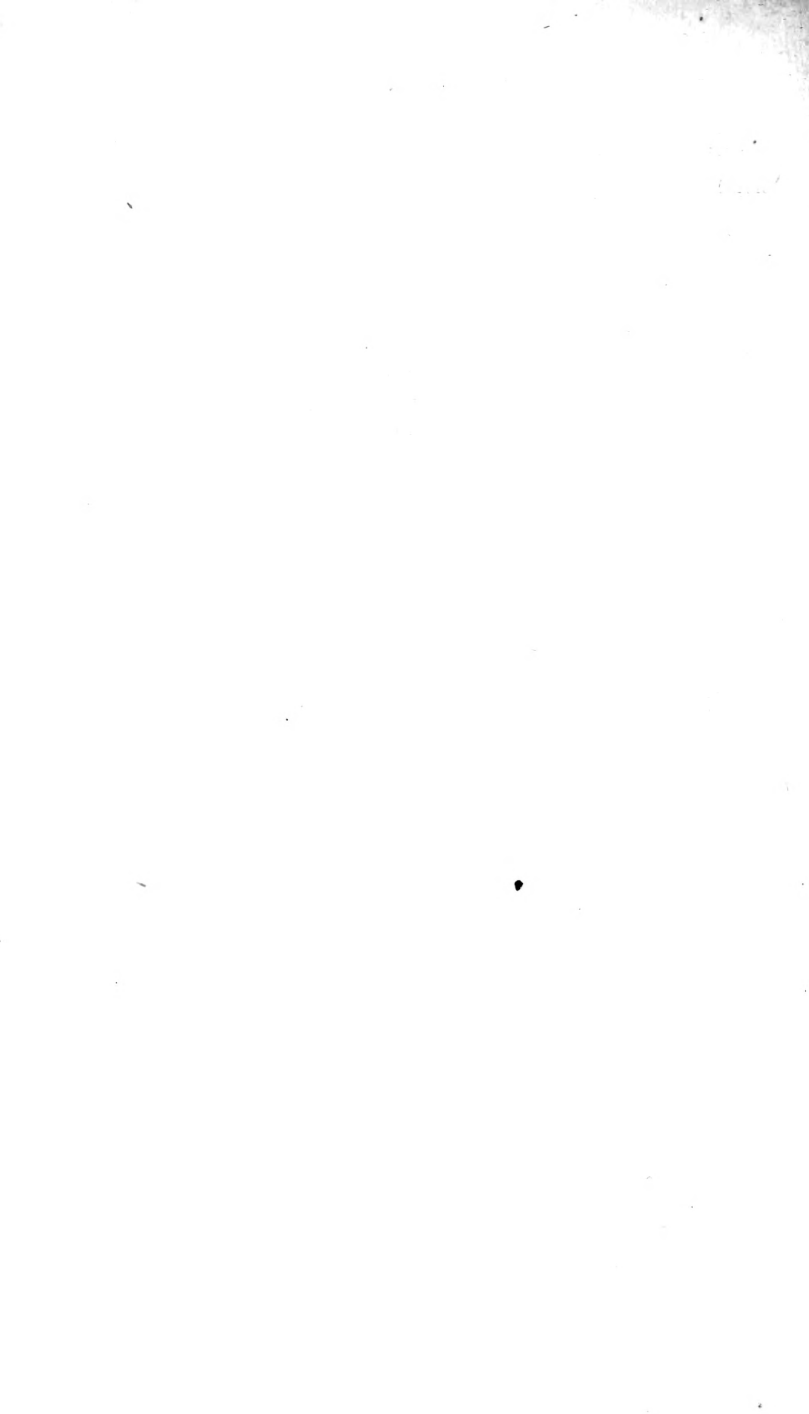
shared the minutest of their interests—O, it is not difficult to see what others were to Jesus and what he was to them.

What is there, then, of all the conduct of human life, to which I find no parallel in his—for a guide in which I should search these Gospels in vain? They tell me for what Jesus prayed, for what he wept, for what he wished—for what he asked his Father, and for what he thanked him. They tell me when he spoke and when he kept silence, and all the purport of his words. They tell me where he paid deference to the established rules of society, and where he trampled on them as unholy and despised. They tell me in what he lifted his head above the distinctions and the pride of life, and scorned its proudest and its greatest—in what he bowed it lower than the lowliest, and became the humblest and the meanest of its little ones. I believe they tell me all that I have need to know; a perfect model on which to form my character. How often, therefore, I return to the study of this portrait, and choose these chapters for my devotional exercise, must be determined by the degree of my anxiety to advance the work of imitation, and forward that task the Spirit of God has undertaken, to restore to my polluted bosom the pure and per-

fect image of my God. And this anxiety will be proportioned to my hatred of sin and its miseries, my love of holiness and its delights. I believe they will all be proportioned to my love of Jesus and my desire for heaven. For what is heaven but the consummation of this task of recovery from the baseness and vileness of fallen nature, to the restored likeness of God? What know I of heaven more than that it is to be pure as he is pure, and holy as he is holy—to be with him and to be like him?

Before I leave the consideration of the Gospels, there is something it may be well to say to those who are in no considerable anxiety about their life and conversation. The world makes no great complaint of them, and they feel no habitual dissatisfaction with themselves: and with respect to the perusal of the Gospels, it takes its turn, but has no particular interest, because it has been so long familiar; they know it almost by heart—it offers nothing new, and they find more benefit from other Scriptures. I would advise them how to find something new in it; and commend it to them for a purpose it has never answered to them yet. In their next hours of devotional reading, I would recommend them to select some chapters of St. Matthew or the other Evangelists, that

speak of the life and character of our Lord, and employ them for the purpose of self-examination, to compare with his life that life with which they are so satisfied—with his character that character which gives them so little uneasiness, and with his conduct and conversation, motives, ends, and aims in all his intercourse with earth, that spirit and deportment of which in themselves the world complains not. If there be any resemblance, well—the examination will help them to encourage and increase it. If there be in all an entire contrast, what is to be thought of it? “If any man have not the spirit of Christ, he is none of his.” “His ye are, whose likeness ye bear.” “If ye have borne the image of the earthly, ye must also bear the image of the heavenly.” “Ye were redeemed, if indeed you be redeemed at all,” “to be conformed to his likeness.” May it be that the work of salvation is not begun in you?



SECTION ELEVENTH.

THE READING OF THE EPISTLES.

THE Epistles are in some respects distinct and different from every other portion of holy writ. They were composed after the scheme of salvation had been consummated. The coming of the Messiah had fulfilled the earlier prophesies. Jesus had lived for man's example, and died for man's redemption. His resurrection and ascension into heaven had witnessed to his divinity ; and the Holy Spirit, the Comforter whom he promised, had been received, to verify his words, and reveal whatever of his truth he had left in obscurity. Further, these Scriptures were written after the experiment of Christianity, if we may so express ourselves, had been made ; after it had tried the soil on which it was implanted and was in future to grow, and man had tried the character and the fruits of the newly-scattered seed. Already had the Saviour's predictions been amply verified ; the enmity and hatred of the world, the opposition of sin and Satan had already had time to show them-

selves, and to call into action the faith of his disciples and the power of the principles implanted in their bosoms. Under these circumstances, it was to be expected the Epistles would contain many things not exhibited in the previous Scriptures; peculiarly suitable for our study, who stand in the same position of full and certain revelation of things realized and proved as the apostles did when they wrote them. And this is in fact the case. If we examine reflectively we shall find there are many things relative to Christianity we have occasion to know, that cannot be found anywhere but in the Epistles; with respect as well to the doctrines of the Gospel, as to the circumstances and difficulties that attend the profession of it in the church in general, or its individual members. With respect to circumstances, there are cases innumerable, which, arising out of the profession of Christianity, could find an example only among those who had professed it; and with respect to the doctrines, intimated and darkly revealed throughout the previous parts of revelation, they never were fully explained to the understanding of the believer, till the Holy Spirit was given as his instructor.

It is thence evident that the Epistles must form a most important portion of our devotional studies. So evident, we need not perhaps stay

to make a remark on those who presume to think the study of them not necessary, or less necessary than that of the Gospels; consider them as fields of controversy and mazes of criticism, unsafe for the simple and the ignorant to adventure in. So boldly does man's perversity make darkness of the purest light, find a labyrinth of mystery in the most perfect revelation of God's will, and charge their own wilful ignorance and blindness on the obscurity of his holy word.

Scarcely expecting to be read by any who are in the habit of thus rejecting and setting at naught this portion of the Bible, we allude to them but slightly. There may be some, however, among our younger readers, who have been misled by them to suppose, that these parts are too difficult for their understanding; that the doctrinal parts, at least, must be reserved for wiser heads and maturer years; they having nothing to do but with plain precepts and practical results. A greater mistake cannot exist, or a more dangerous one. The religion of Christ is not a mere system of morality, in which opinions are of no consequence, so the precepts be observed, and you may believe what you like, if you do what you are bidden. On the contrary, when Paul was

asked the way of salvation, what he prescribed was a point of belief—a doctrine : and it is the very first principle of the religion of the Gospel and of our church, that if its precepts could be observed, which they cannot, without the acceptance of its doctrines, being a fabric raised on other foundation than that which God has laid, it could do no otherwise than fall ; and what little had been done in the way of slavish obedience, were not only worthless, but bearing actually the character of sin. Of this may every one, of whatever age or capacity, be assured ; that if they fancy they are fulfilling the precepts of religion without understanding its fundamental doctrines, they are deceiving themselves to their eternal ruin. Most particularly on such we urge a frequent, earnest, and devout perusal of the Epistles.

We know, most of us by experience, all by observation, how much knowledge is often wanting after the principle of grace has been received into the heart—how incorrect and vacillating principles betray us perpetually into errors and excesses, both of conduct and opinion. Every new-comer acts upon our ignorance to unsettle and mislead us. Not certain what is true or what is right, we fall eagerly into every mistake that is proposed to

us; and when its futility is found, either is our faith in the Gospel altogether shaken, or our steps are retraced in much darkness and weariness of spirit. We try the depths and intricacies of human controversy; but these only involve us in deeper obscurity—for where the wise differ, how are the simple to decide? We accumulate books and opinions upon disputed points, and from their contradictions gather greater confusion than we began with: or are influenced by a name to take up opinions without duly appreciating them, and follow a party till some greater name or newer party incline us to the opposite. Meantime, the spirit of religion thrives not within us—“Unstable as water thou shalt not excel.” The peace of a satisfied conscience is not in our bosoms: the activity of a mind set free from doubt and fearfulness is not seen in our lives: we are, as Paul describes, “Ever learning, but never coming to a knowledge of the truth.”

Nothing is more essential to the fruition of a religious life, than a clear, correct and satisfied understanding of the doctrines of the Gospel at its commencement. This may be proved by fact, as by reasoning it might be expected. I have rarely seen a steady course:

and a consistent Christian conduct, maintained through the life, but I have found the doctrines were well understood and received at its commencement : while of the vacillating, unsteady, and unequal walk, I have as generally found the origin to be an unsatisfied and uncertain creed. Let every one, therefore, however young in religion, be persuaded that it is of incalculable importance what they believe—that though some truths may be more essential to salvation than others, there is no truth that is unimportant—there cannot be a truth too much—a truth of so little value, that it should be wilfully dispensed with. I do not advise to controversy, but I do advise to strenuous unremitted inquiry, till the mind be fully enlightened and satisfied of the tenets of its faith. I do not advise to wade through the folios of disputation, but I advise to seek light and knowledge in the pages of Scripture, and never to relinquish the pursuit, till the belief that has arisen out of that study is too strong to be moved by the opinions of any man ; though ready, ever in deepest humility, ready to be relinquished, if by increasing light upon his Holy Word, God should disclose to us more or otherwise than we have yet perceived.

And may all, if they will, attain to this clear

understanding of the Scriptures, in doctrines perhaps for ages controverted, and no nearer agreed upon than they were at first?—I do not know. But this I have observed—the ignorant, the unlettered, and the simple-minded, attain to it, and rest in it, and live by it, while wisdom cavils, and learning is at fault—and if you go to them with your thinkings, reasonings, and doubtings, they smile upon your folly, and tell you “it is so in the Bible, and they have no doubt the Bible is right.” It is certain that none can attain to the right understanding of the Scriptures, but those to whom God by his Spirit will unclothe them; and this Spirit has been promised to all who diligently seek it. Is the deduction not that the knowledge of all truth is within the reach of every one who rightly pursues it? No limit has been set for intellect, age, or condition. That this certainty of truth is so seldom reached, there may be many reasons. Instead of simple, earnest reference to Scripture for our establishment in disputed points of doctrine, we generally receive them in the first instance from men—any who happen to have influence at the time. Immediately they become our opinions; there is a sort of appropriation; we begin to value them as something of our own; we grow warm and

eager in their defence; unconsciously to ourselves, a party feeling kindles in our bosoms, and the doctrines gain an interest with us, quite apart from our persuasion of their truth. When these opinions happen to be impugned, instead of going to Scripture to see if we are really right, we get volume upon volume to confirm us in them; all who are supposed to differ being shunned as dangerous, or read with settled determination to find them in the wrong. Thus we grow warmer and warmer, surer and surer—for a little time. Our doctrines being founded on no actual certainty derived from the understanding of God's word, they are ever liable to terminate where they had their origin—in the influence of human opinion. Some stronger influence, or perhaps the mere effect of experience and reflection, discloses to us how very little ground we really had for what we so warmly maintained. Now again, if we were wise, we might go to the Scripture to learn a better creed, or to get a better foundation for the one we have. But it is not uncommon, instead of this, to find the heady controversialist, because himself was wrong, asserting that everybody is wrong, or everybody is right—that all mean alike, and the points disputed are of no consequence—and he that before was violent

for an unexamined creed, is now supinely contented without any creed at all. And from this it results, that a great proportion of people do not know what they believe—and a still greater do not know why they believe what they do—and of the remainder very many, when urged upon the grounds of their belief, refer you to this man and that man, this writer and that writer, to anything but the word of God—for thence they had them not, however they may in fact be found there.

Most earnestly, therefore, I recommend the devotional reading of the Epistles, for the express purpose of correcting, confirming, or elucidating our doctrinal views. This is not a knowledge, like others we have spoken of, better reserved for times of study than intruded upon our hours of devotion. It is of things to be learned best, perhaps learned only on our knees—I mean, that since they must be taught us of God, they can be learned only in his presence, with prayer on the lips, and devotion in the heart—in the feeling, if not in the attitude of supplication. Whenever you are agitated with doubtfulness upon any point of belief, when some opinion you have heard distracts your judgment, or disturbs your thoughts, by no means put it aside as of no consequence, or

unfit to be entertained—unless indeed it be frivolous and beside the purpose of God's revelation—but take it with you at your next devotional reading—seek out some chapter that bears upon the point, study it as before God, and earnestly entreat him that you may find—not the confirmation of previous opinion, arguments to baffle your opponents—but truth—for you or against you, truth. Never, I believe, were that our simple object, should we fail to find it, and to become gradually enlightened in everything God in his revelation has made known. If you find doctrines you cannot understand, believe them first, and wait for more light to understand them by. If there are sentences that have been differently interpreted, take them upon their plainest sense, till the light of other Scriptures reveals to you a better. And having proved your earnest desire to know the truth, by the humble, simple, and teachable spirit with which you have inquired of it before God, go not to disprove it instantly on leaving your chamber, by taking the word of the first person you meet, in contradiction to the word you have been reading: nay, nor the opinions of the world united, could you get them to agree, against the plain sense of the written word of God. But if anything should arise

to make you doubt the justness of your conclusions, go back on the first opportunity to the presence of God, and to your Bible, and correct the opinion where you formed it.

It is needless to say the Epistles contain a great deal more than doctrines. They are peculiarly valuable in that they contain directions for the life and conversation of Christians, as distinct from other men. They are addressed to the saints and brethren exclusively, as the head of each epistle expresses, and fully make known to us what the early followers of Jesus were, as well as what God required they should be. This is most useful. We are extremely apt, particularly in our days of experience, to fancy our case unlike to every other—our feelings, difficulties, and temptations different. Yet if we examine the Epistles for the purpose, we shall find of almost every case an applicable and sufficient example, with directions to guide, and assurances to support us under it. Let us not omit, in every doubt, to have recourse to these testimonies of the faithfulness of God and the perversity of man.

The precepts also of the Epistles are invaluable; and for this reason. Man, when he passes from a state of nature to a state of grace, becomes a new creature—old things are passed

away, all things are become new. He looks about upon the altered world as one who knows not where he treads. The rules by which he has directed his conduct hitherto are insufficient or inapplicable. His previous maxims and habits are unsuitable to his new condition. Fixed and immutable as are the laws of God and the principles of right, so thoroughly has man's corruption mistaken and perverted them, that when summoned back into his Maker's service, he has to find himself an entirely new code of laws for the direction of his conduct, even in the common relationships of life. As a father, a child, a servant, a subject, there are new demands upon his conscience, and new responsibilities to meet. I do not say different from what the natural man's duties are—but decidedly different from what his conduct can be. This new code, signified in the ten commandments, and explained in the Saviour's sermon on the mount, is amplified and minutely digested in the Epistles ; and they cannot be too often referred to as a digest of the moral law of God, in all its spiritual applications.

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